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# Mauritania

a country study









# Mauritania

## a country study

Federal Research Division  
Library of Congress  
Edited by  
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Research Completed  
December 1987



On the cover: Pastoralists near 'Ayoûn el 'Atrouïs

Second Edition, First Printing, 1990.

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Mauritania: A Country Study.

Area handbook series, DA pam 550-161

“Research completed June 1988.”

Bibliography: pp. 189-200.

Includes index.

Supt. of Docs. no. : D 101.22:000-000/987

1. Mauritania I. Handloff, Robert Earl, 1942- . II. Curran,  
Brian Dean. Mauritania, a country study. III. Library of Congress.  
Federal Research Division. IV. Series. V. Series: Area handbook  
series.

DT554.22.M385 1990 966.1—dc20 89-600361 CIP

Headquarters, Department of the Army  
DA Pam 550-161

## Foreword

This volume is one in a continuing series of books now being prepared by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress under the Country Studies—Area Handbook Program. The last page of this book lists the other published studies.

Most books in the series deal with a particular foreign country, describing and analyzing its political, economic, social, and national security systems and institutions, and examining the interrelationships of those systems and the ways they are shaped by cultural factors. Each study is written by a multidisciplinary team of social scientists. The authors seek to provide a basic understanding of the observed society, striving for a dynamic rather than a static portrayal. Particular attention is devoted to the people who make up the society, their origins, dominant beliefs and values, their common interests and the issues on which they are divided, the nature and extent of their involvement with national institutions, and their attitudes toward each other and toward their social system and political order.

The books represent the analysis of the authors and should not be construed as an expression of an official United States government position, policy, or decision. The authors have sought to adhere to accepted standards of scholarly objectivity. Corrections, additions, and suggestions for changes from readers will be welcomed for use in future editions.

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## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of Brian Dean Curran and Joann Schrock, who coauthored the earlier edition of *Mauritania: A Country Study*. Their work provided the organizational outline for the present volume as well as substantial portions of the text. The authors are also grateful to those individuals in various public and private agencies who contributed photographs, research materials, and invaluable time and expertise to the production of this book.

The authors wish to thank members of the Federal Research Division staff who contributed directly to the preparation of the text. Thomas Collelo edited drafts, photographs, and maps; Richard F. Nyrop reviewed all drafts and provided guidance; Barbara Auerbach, Sharon Costello, Barbara Dash, and Ruth Nieland edited the manuscript; Andrea T. Merrill performed the final prepublication review; and Shirley Kessel prepared the index. Marilyn L. Majeska managed editorial production. Also involved in preparing the text were Gwendolyn Brown Batts, Barbara Edgerton, and Izella Watson. Malinda B. Neale of the Library of Congress Composing Unit prepared the camera-ready copy, under the supervision of Peggy Pixley.

Lending timely and invaluable graphics support were Thomas Collelo, Carolina E. Forrester, and David P. Cabitto, who reviewed draft maps from which Greenhorn and O'Mara and Harriett R. Blood prepared the final maps. Additional thanks are due also to David P. Cabitto, who designed the cover artwork and the illustrations on the title page of each chapter and who, assisted by Sandra K. Cotugno and Kimberly A. Lord, prepared charts and graphs.

The authors also wish to thank several individuals who provided research and operational support. Meridel Jackson was instrumental in adapting software to the authors' word-processing needs. Naomi Greer helped prepare bibliographies and, with Patricia Rigsbee, assisted in research.

Finally, the authors thank Madam Turkia Ould Daddah, cultural affairs officer of the Embassy of Mauritania in Washington, D.C., for providing photographs used in the text and for sharing her expertise.



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## Preface

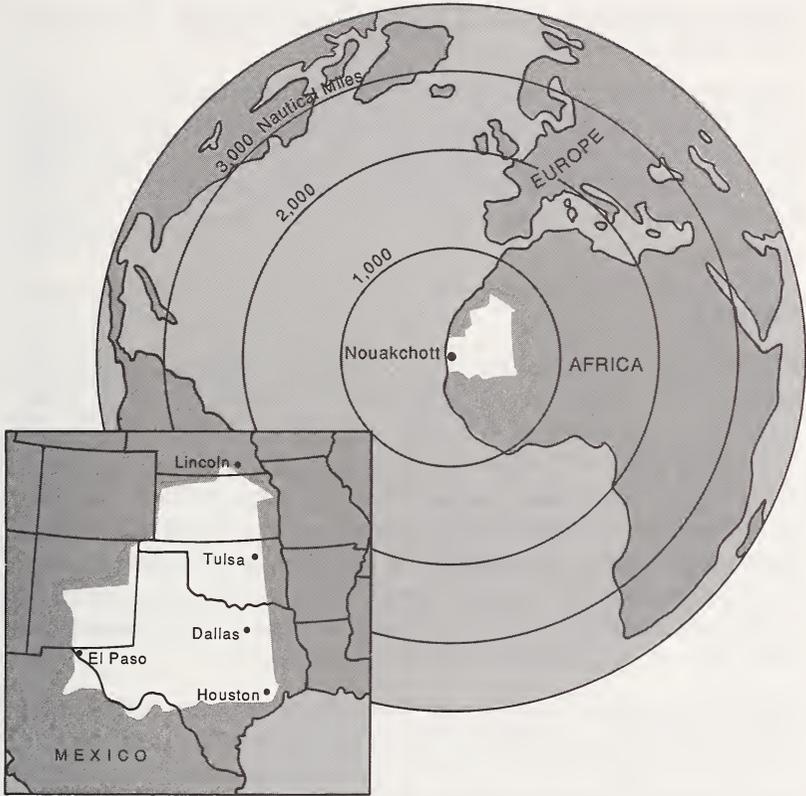
*Mauritania: A Country Study* replaces the edition published in 1972, twelve years after Mauritania became independent. Between 1960 and 1972, Mauritania struggled to achieve political unity and economic independence. It also suffered a drought and an attendant economic dislocation that lasted through the 1970s. In the period between 1972 and 1987, intermittent drought, desertification, and the war in the Western Sahara further exacerbated Mauritania's political and economic problems.

Like the earlier study, this edition seeks to provide a concise and objective account of the history and dominant social, political, economic, and military aspects of contemporary Mauritania. Sources of information included scholarly monographs and journals, official reports of governments and international organizations, periodicals, and foreign and domestic newspapers. Chapter bibliographies appear at the end of the book; brief comments on some of the more valuable sources appear at the end of each chapter. Measurements are given in the metric system; a conversion table to aid readers is included (see table 1, Appendix). A glossary is also included.

The authors have spelled place-names in accordance with usage established by the United States Board on Geographic Names. In transliterating personal names, they have followed standard usage in official Mauritanian sources.



## Country Profile



### Country

**Formal Name:** Islamic Republic of Mauritania.

**Short Form:** Mauritania.

**Term for Citizens:** Mauritanians.

**Capital:** Nouakchott.

### Geography

**Size:** Total area of 1,030,700 square kilometers includes 400 square kilometers of water.

**Topography:** Generally flat with vast, arid plains broken by occasional ridges and outcroppings. In center of country, series of scarps facing southwest longitudinally bisect plains; sandstone plateaus, some with isolated peaks, between scarps. Northeast a vast region of dunes.

**Climate:** Desert climate across northern three-fourths of country with diurnal extremes in temperatures and meager and irregular rainfall. During rainy season (July to September), average rainfall in far south 400 to 600 millimeters; in northern two-thirds, 0 to 100 millimeters. Desert winds throughout year cause frequent sandstorms.

## Society

**Population:** Census of 1979 enumerated population of over 1.4 million, including nomadic population of approximately 513,000. In 1987 approximately 1.8 million population with annual growth rate of 2.9 percent. At least 40 percent, and perhaps as much as 80 percent, of population urban and concentrated in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou; remainder farmers or small town dwellers. Rural population densities ranged from 0.1 per square kilometer in north to 35 per square kilometer in south, with overall average of 1.8 per square kilometer. Over 46 percent of population under age fifteen.

**Ethnic Groups:** Six ethnic groups; one primarily Arab-Berber (Maure), remainder black African (Toucouleur, Fulbe, Soninké, Wolof, and Bambara). Numerical proportions of each a source of contention; in 1978 government claimed 70 percent Maure; others said blacks constituted 50 percent or more.

**Languages:** Official languages: Hassaniya Arabic, spoken primarily by Maures, and French, preferred by blacks for political reasons. Fulfulde, Azayr, Wolof, and Mandé-kan spoken by black groups in south.

**Education:** Secular education not compulsory; in 1985 approximately 35 percent of primary-school-age children and 4 to 10 percent of secondary-school-age children enrolled. Secular schooling based on French system with six years of primary schooling followed by four-year lower cycle of secondary schooling and three-year upper cycle. One major secular university and various teacher training and vocational institutes, all government owned. Islamic education common throughout country; usually limited to rote learning of Quran. One Islamic institute of higher learning

providing instruction in Islamic subjects and teaching methods. Literacy rate estimated at 5 percent at independence, about 18 percent in 1985.

**Religion:** Virtually entire population Sunni Muslims and adhere to Maliki rite.

**Health:** Infectious and parasitic diseases, including malaria, endemic. Health standards low and facilities woefully inadequate; severe shortages of equipment, supplies, and trained personnel.

## Economy

**Gross Domestic Product (GDP):** Real growth rate of GDP averaged 8 percent in 1960s, then fell to 2.3 percent from mid-1970s through mid-1980s, reflecting cumulative effects of drought, war in Western Sahara, and falling prices for iron ore. In 1986 GDP per capita US\$410, same as in 1976.

**Mining:** Until mid-1980s largest contributor to GDP and source of export earnings. In 1960s provided as much as one-third of GDP and 80 percent of export earnings. By mid-1980s mining accounted for about 10 percent of GDP and 40 percent of export earnings, as prices for iron and copper ores dropped in world markets. By 1987 mining accounted for only 8.6 percent of GDP, although mining operations remained largest nongovernmental employer.

**Fishing:** Mauritania's offshore waters among richest in world but in danger of being overfished. Before 1975 fishing and fish processing accounted for 5 percent of GDP, mainly through licensing and royalties. After government began participating in 1979, fishing industry grew rapidly and by 1983 accounted for 54 percent of foreign exchange and approximately 10 percent of GDP.

**Herding and Agriculture:** Employed most workers but least productive sector because Mauritania has one of poorest agricultural bases in West Africa. In 1960s livestock and crop production 35 to 45 percent of GDP. In mid-1970s 20 percent of total population farmed and 60 to 70 percent herded. From mid-1970s through mid-1980s, combined contribution to GDP approximately 25 percent, and 85 percent of nomadic herders moved into cities. In 1986 Mauritania produced about one-third of its grain needs, up from 3 to 8 percent during 1983-85 drought years.

**Imports:** In 1986 approximately US\$494 million. Major imports foodstuffs and other consumer goods, petroleum products, and capital goods.

**Exports:** In 1986 approximately US\$400 million. Major exports fish, iron ore, and small amounts of gypsum and gum arabic. Also unrecorded but important export of cattle on the hoof to Senegal.

**Major Trade Partners:** Western Europe, Japan, United States, and various African countries.

**Balance of Payments:** By 1985 external public debt nearly 250 percent of GDP, making Mauritania one of most deeply indebted nations in world. Depended extensively on foreign economic credits and grant aid, in particular from oil-producing Arab states and France.

**Exchange Rate:** 73.7 ouguiyas to US\$1.00 (September 1986).

## **Transportation and Communications**

**Roads:** In late 1980s, only 1,500 kilometers of paved roadway out of a total 9,000 kilometers of roads. Unpaved roads generally tracks across the sand. Costs for maintaining sand-free roads exceeded budgetary means.

**Railroads:** 650-kilometer standard-gauge single-track line linked Zouïrât mines with port at Nouadhibou and carried only iron ore.

**Ports:** Nouadhibou most important, with facilities for handling ore, processed fish, and commercial shipping. In late 1986, new Chinese-built Friendship Port with annual capacity of 500,000 tons inaugurated at Nouakchott but not yet operational by late 1987 because it still lacked certain facilities and equipment.

**Airports:** Nouakchott and Nouadhibou most important; both capable of handling most commercial jet aircraft. Thirty regional airfields served by Air Mauritanie, national airline.

**Communications:** Barely adequate system of cable, open-wire lines, radiotelephone, and wireless telegraph linked Nouakchott to Paris, most regional capitals, and some other towns in Mauritania. Also linked to International Telecommunications Satellite Organization (INTELSAT) and Arab Satellite Telecommunications Organization (ARABSAT) networks.

## **Government and Politics**

**Government:** Following coup in 1984, governance by twenty-one-member Military Committee for National Salvation (Comité Militaire de Salut National—CMSN). CMSN members, military officers of varying rank and status, represented sometimes disparate,

sometimes overlapping corporate and ethnic interests; issues decided by consensus. President, elected by CMSN members, appointed a cabinet, which administered policies decided by CMSN.

**Administrative Divisions:** Divided into twelve regions, each of which was both a judicial district and an administrative subdivision headed by a governor.

**Foreign Affairs:** Member of Nonaligned Movement; maintained friendly ties with East and West. As economy weakened and economic dependence deepened, developed closer ties with wealthier Middle Eastern and Maghribi states and strengthened relations with Soviet Union and China.

## **National Security**

**Armed Forces:** In 1987 army 14,400; navy 320; and air force 150.

**Combat Units:** In 1987 army consisted of one infantry battalion, two armored car squadrons, one parachute-commando company, three reconnaissance squadrons, two artillery batteries, one airborne company, one engineering corps, and one antiaircraft battery. Naval weapons included thirteen coastal patrol boats (eight of which were seaworthy), of which only two could be dispatched at a time. Air force included thirteen combat aircraft.

**Military Budget:** In 1985 approximately US\$43.3 million, about 25 percent of central government's budget.

**Police and Internal Security Agencies:** In 1987 single national police force with approximately 1,000 men performed routine police functions in cities; National Guard, numbering 1,400 men, responsible for rural areas. Both under supervision of Ministry of Interior, Telecommunications, and Information, which also responsible for Customs Corps and Presidential Guard.



Figure 1. Administrative Divisions of Mauritania, 1987

## Introduction

CONTEMPORARY OBSERVERS OF MAURITANIA, like the French colonizers of an earlier century, often have described the country as a bridge linking North Africa and West Africa. Certainly individual groups within Mauritania have maintained strong cultural and economic ties with their neighbors—to whom they were often related—in both regions. Yet although the country served as a geographical bridge, crisscrossed by merchants transporting gold, salt, and slaves between the northern and southern edges of the Sahara, it also marked a cultural boundary between sedentary farmers of sub-Saharan Africa and the nomadic Arab-Berber herders from the Maghrib (see Glossary). Throughout Mauritania's history, the interaction between the two cultures has been charged with social and political conflict that has defined and will continue to define Mauritanian politics. Even Islam, to which virtually the entire population adhered after the ninth century, provided but a veneer of unity (see *Religious Life*, ch. 2).

The character of present-day Mauritania's population reflected the waves of immigration from north and south that had begun in the third century A.D. The first wave, Berbers from the north, migrated into what is now Mauritania in the third and fourth centuries and later in the seventh and eighth centuries. Local populations either became vassals in service to the Berbers or migrated farther south.

In the ninth century, three Berber groups—the Lemtuna, Mes-sufa, and Djodala—formed a loose confederation in order to better control the easternmost trans-Saharan trade route. The Sanhadja Confederation, as it came to be called, monopolized trade between the ancient empire of Ghana and the city of Sijilmasa. The historically important towns of Koumbi Saleh, Aoudaghost, Oualâta, Tichît, and Ouadane flourished during this epoch.

In the eleventh century, following the breakup of the Sanhadja Confederation and a period of unrest and warfare among the Sanhadja Berbers, a small group of Sanhadja zealots established a religious center from which they preached a doctrine of Islamic reform and holy war. By 1090 the empire of the Almoravids—as the fundamentalist revolutionaries came to be known—extended from Spain to Senegal. Within forty years, however, the fervor and zeal of the original Almoravid reformers waned, and, at the same time, their foes to the north and south grew stronger.

The black Sudanic kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai eventually expanded over the next six centuries into what had been Berber strongholds and constituted the second wave of immigration. A third wave, again from the north, saw various Yemeni Arab groups infiltrating southward, pushing the Berbers and Africans before them. By the late seventeenth century, one Yemeni group, the Bani Hassan, came to dominate all of what is now Mauritania. As the Berbers moved south, they forced the blacks toward the Senegal River Basin (see Black Africans, ch. 2).

Mauritania's social structure in the late twentieth century dated from the late seventeenth century, when the Bani Hassan defeated a Berber force seeking to expel them. The nomadic Arab warrior groups subsequently dominated the Berbers, many of whom became clerics serving the Arabs. At the bottom of the social pyramid were the black slaves. All three groups spoke one language, Hassaniya Arabic, and became known as Maures. Meanwhile, free blacks, culturally related to Africans in the south, settled in the Senegal River Basin.

Europeans became interested in Mauritania only in the second half of the sixteenth century. French traders at Saint Louis in what is now Senegal purchased gum arabic (see Glossary) from producers in southern Mauritania. Until the mid-nineteenth century, and then for only a short period when French forces occupied the Trarza and Brakna regions in southern Mauritania, Arabs and Berbers paid little heed to the Europeans.

At the start of the twentieth century, French forces under Xavier Cappolani moved back into Mauritania and through brute force and co-optation pacified refractory Arab chiefs. But in contrast to its colonial administration elsewhere in West Africa, the French administered Mauritania indirectly, relying on existing Arab-dominated institutions (see French Colonial Administration, ch. 1). This laissez-faire attitude persisted until the 1940s. Following World War II, at a time when other French colonies were agitating for independence or at least substantial reform, there was only minimal political activity in Mauritania. France nonetheless implemented changes that corresponded to reforms demanded and accorded elsewhere in francophone West Africa.

The new political freedom touched perhaps 10 percent of the population; yet even among this group, sharp divisions persisted and threatened the political independence of the colony. Some Arabs and Berbers with strong family ties in Morocco favored union with Morocco, while black Africans in the south wanted to join the nascent Mali Federation, which joined Senegal and Mali. Only by co-opting the country's traditional leaders with vague promises was

Mauritania's leading political figure and first president, Moktar Ould Daddah, able to achieve the pretense of unity as Mauritania celebrated its independence on November 28, 1960.

During the first decades of independence, Mauritania remained deeply divided. Southern (non-Maure) blacks resented Maure domination of the political process, which led, among other things, to the disproportionate representation of Maures in the bureaucracy and officer corps of the armed forces, the imbalanced allocation of development funds, and the imposition of Hassaniya Arabic as the language of instruction in all secondary schools. With the support of students, the Mauritanian Workers Union (Union des Travailleurs Mauritaniens—UTM), Mauritania's first trade union, protested a salary scale by which some West European expatriates received wages almost 1,000 times higher than their Mauritanian counterparts. Finally, Mauritania's costly involvement in the Western Sahara conflict was part of a Maure agenda and held little for southern blacks, who made up the bulk of the fighting force and suffered most of the casualties.

In 1975 Mauritania allied with Morocco against the Polisario (see Glossary) guerrillas of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), ostensibly to obtain Tiris al Gharbiyya. But by 1978, after several surprise attacks by the Polisario guerrillas against Nouakchott and the iron ore mines at Zouîrât, it had become apparent that Mauritania's military was no match even for the smaller guerrilla forces (see Conflict in the Western Sahara, ch. 1). Nonetheless, the government continued its costly involvement, in part to stave off a possible invasion by Moroccan troops should Mauritania curtail its effort and in part to satisfy the Maures who saw the annexation of Tiris al Gharbiyya as the first step toward a rejuvenated Greater Mauritania (see Glossary). Mauritania's blacks in particular opposed the war on several counts. First, it siphoned off scarce resources that might otherwise have supported greater agricultural development in the south; second, it paved the way for military officers, most of whom were Maures, to insinuate themselves into the civilian government; and, finally, the majority of the enlisted men were black, although most officers were Maure.

Pointing to the debilitating costs of the war and the subsequent political dissension in Mauritania, a group of military officers staged a coup in July 1978 that brought Colonel Mustapha Ould Salek to power as prime minister. Salek proved unable to extricate Mauritania from the conflict, and in April 1979 Colonel Ahmed Ould Bouceif and Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla seized power. Shortly thereafter, Bouceif was killed in airplane crash, and Haidalla became prime minister.

Ruling through the Military Committee for National Salvation (Comité Militaire de Salut National—CMSN), Haidalla arranged a cease-fire with the guerrillas and pledged to remain neutral in the Western Sahara conflict, although his government later accorded diplomatic recognition to the SADR. Meanwhile, Polisario guerrillas continued to transit Mauritanian territory with impunity, inviting cross-border reprisals from Moroccan troops.

In response to alleged corruption in government and a discernible and apparently unwelcome political tilt toward the SADR, Colonel Maaouiya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya staged a palace coup in December 1984. Proclaiming itself reformist, the Taya government was as anxious to institute the forms of democracy as it was to deflect responsibility for its inability to implement necessary economic and political changes and to defuse ethnic conflict. Taya pledged to hold elections for municipal offices in thirteen cities (which he did in December 1987), free political prisoners, uphold civil rights, and end corruption. A second round of elections, this time for approximately 500 town councillors (*conseillers*) across the country, took place in December 1987 and January 1988. As important as the elections were to Mauritians, they did little to reduce the ethnic tensions interfering with development (see Political Culture, ch. 4).

In the late 1980s, Mauritania had six major ethnic groups: Maure, Toucouleur, Fulbe, Soninké, Wolof, and Bambara. The Maures included the white Arab-Berber descendants of the original Maghribi immigrants and blacks called *harratin* (sing., *hartani*—see Glossary), former slaves of white Maures who had assimilated Maure culture. The other ethnic groups consisted of black Africans, who lived in the south along the Senegal River or in cities. Given the large number of black Maures, the significant cultural distinction in Mauritania was not white versus black but rather Maure (white and black) versus black. But even black Africans had divergent responses, often class linked, to Maure hegemony.

The relative size of each group was in dispute both because census data were deficient and because the Maure-dominated government, to preserve its prerogatives, pretended to eschew ethnic labeling. According to Mauritanian government figures, however, Maures constituted 70 percent of the population, while blacks were said to be overrepresented in the bureaucracy and schooling. Others reported that blacks formed at least half the population but were intentionally undercounted and were underrepresented in high-level positions in the government. In any case, Maures openly discriminated against the black population, which, well into the twentieth century, was considered a source of slaves.

The most outspoken and resentful opponents of the Maure-dominated government were the Toucouleur. They constituted the leadership of the African Liberation Forces of Mauritania (Forces de Libération Africaine de Mauritanie—FLAM), an outlawed anti-government organization based in Dakar, Senegal. In September and October 1986, the government arrested between thirty and forty suspected FLAM members, including thirteen prominent Toucouleur who were charged with sowing “hatred and confusion” and thereby “undermining the values and foundations of . . . society.” Partly to protest those arrests as well as continued Maure domination of the government, a group of Toucouleur, some of whom had high-ranking positions in the military, reportedly plotted to overthrow the Taya government in October 1987. In all, 51 persons were brought to trial for the plot, although FLAM claimed that the government detained more than 1,000 people. Three of the defendants, all army lieutenants, were found guilty of attempting to overthrow the government and were executed on December 3, 1987. Subsequently, students in Nouakchott reportedly demonstrated to protest government racism, and violent clashes between supporters and foes of the government occurred in the capital and in Kaédi and Bogué.

A more immediate cause of the disturbances concerned land-ownership along the Senegal River. By permitting the government to cede otherwise fallow land to those committed to improving it, the 1983 Land Reform Act seemingly accorded Maures preference in acquiring irrigated land (see *Political Power in the Mid-1980s*, ch. 4). Most blacks, and especially the Toucouleur, believed that wealthy Maures from Nouakchott or Nouadhibou would appropriate land along the river, displacing blacks whose families had lived in the area for generations. Complicating the issue was the fact that some wealthy black landowners living near the river supported the government’s attempts to assemble large tracts of land for capital-intensive farming, even if the reforms dispossessed less fortunate blacks.

In the late 1980s, as other sectors of the economy stagnated or faded, irrigated agricultural land became extremely valuable. World prices for iron ore, long Mauritania’s principal export, remained low. Fishing, which by 1983 had supplanted iron ore as the chief foreign exchange earner, appeared to be tapering off following years of overfishing by foreign fleets. Finally, as the worst effects of the drought attenuated, the government targeted agriculture for development. With encouragement and support from the World Bank (see Glossary) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF—see Glossary), the government raised producer prices by 40 percent

and then expanded irrigation and flood control programs to bring more marginal land into production.

To finance its domestic investment, Mauritania relied on foreign assistance, which between 1980 and 1985 amounted to approximately US\$170 per capita. Mauritania's principal benefactors included wealthy Arab states, France, and Japan. By 1985 Mauritania's foreign debt amounted to US\$1.8 billion, or nearly 250 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP—see Glossary), making Mauritania one of the most deeply indebted nations in the world (see Balance of Payments, Debt, and Foreign Assistance, ch. 3).

One of the reasons for its dependence on foreign funding was the size of the military budget. As in many other Third World countries experiencing domestic turmoil, the military absorbed a disproportionate share of the budget—25 percent in 1985. Military spending distorted the economy by diverting funds from economic development. At the same time, however, the military provided personnel with technical and administrative expertise that could be transferred elsewhere within the government. The military also participated in road building, public health campaigns, and disaster relief. Meanwhile, the hope that the armed forces might foster a sense of national unity transcending ethnic peculiarities proved illusory because most of the officers were Maure, whereas most recruits were black. The attempted coup in October 1987 aggravated that disparity; in its aftermath, approximately 500 noncommissioned officers, most of whom were blacks, were dismissed from the army (see *The Armed Forces*, ch. 5).

Mauritania in the late 1980s held little promise for its citizens. By 1987 desertification, perhaps Mauritania's greatest enemy, had claimed over 90 percent of the land that had been arable at independence. Competition for increasingly scarce resources—which might include land, education, or slots in the bureaucracy—intensified, pitting Mauritania's non-Maure blacks against Maures. In spite of its reformist intentions, the Taya regime perforce relied increasingly on coercion to maintain order. Only the prospect for a negotiated settlement between Algeria and Morocco in the Western Sahara afforded even the possibility of positive economic change. The redeployment of Moroccan troops from positions just north of Mauritania's border with the Western Sahara and the removal of SADR refugee camps from Tindouf in extreme western Algeria would allow Mauritania to reduce the size and cost of its military, thereby freeing additional funds for economic development. The savings would probably be slight, however, and the net effect unimportant. Only an end to desertification, over which Mauritania had

little control, would allow resources to expand to meet the needs of all Mauritians, both Maures and blacks.

November 16, 1988

\* \* \*

In early April 1989, a minor border dispute involving Senegalese farmers and Mauritanian herders escalated by the end of the month into the slaughter in Nouakchott and Dakar of hundreds of citizens. The rioting in Senegal, in which hundreds of small neighborhood shops belonging to Mauritanian retailers were also looted, followed a period of inflation, rising unemployment, and strikes, all of which aggravated discontent. The violence in Mauritania appeared to be one more chapter in the longstanding conflict between Maures and black Africans, many of whom farmed in the valuable irrigated lands along the Senegal River. To quell the violence, several countries, including France and Morocco, arranged an airlift to repatriate nationals from the two countries back across their respective borders.

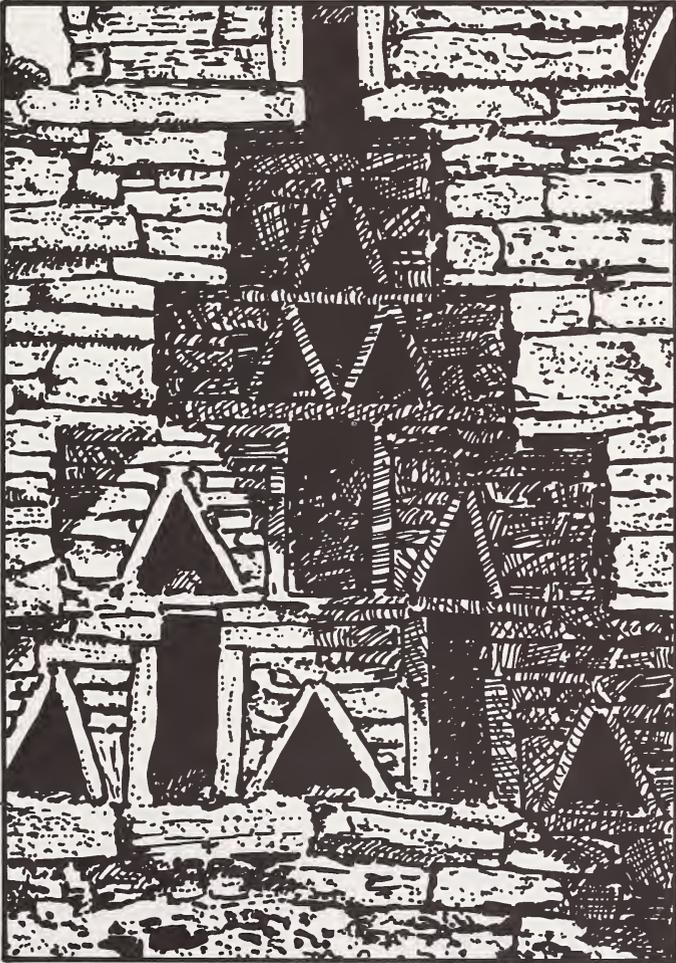
Subsequently, Mauritania repatriated or expelled as many as 100,000 people, many of whom had been born in Mauritania and had never lived in Senegal; Senegal repatriated a similar number that also included Maures, mainly the small shopkeepers, who had never lived in Mauritania. The elimination of the Mauritanian retailers was expected to exacerbate economic hardship among poorer Senegalese. Among those leaving Mauritania were perhaps, 5,000 or more farmers and herders, all nominally Senegalese, who had been living for generations on the flood plain on the Mauritanian side of the river (which, according to a French colonial document dating from 1933, belonged to Senegal). According to reports, their villages were burned and their assets confiscated. Presumably their lands will be appropriated by Maures. Observers speculated that the government of Mauritania—or elements within the government—were taking advantage of the situation to expel blacks, Toucouleur in particular, in order to obtain valuable agricultural land and at the same time eliminate the clamor of those seeking equal rights for blacks. It was all the more ironic that the government used *harratin* to carry out operations against the southern blacks.

August 30, 1989

Robert E. Handloff



## Chapter 1. Historical Setting





*Architectural detail of an old mosque at Tichit*

THE SAHARA HAS LINKED rather than divided the peoples who inhabit it and has served as an avenue for migration and conquest. Mauritania, lying next to the Atlantic coast at the western edge of the desert, received and assimilated into its complex society many waves of these migrants and conquerors. Berbers moved south to Mauritania beginning in the third century A.D., followed by Arabs in the eighth century, subjugating and assimilating Mauritania's original inhabitants. From the eighth through the fifteenth century, black kingdoms of the western Sudan, such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, brought their political culture from the south.

The divisive tendencies of the various groups within Mauritanian society have always worked against the development of Mauritanian unity. Both the Sanhadja Confederation, at its height from the eighth to the tenth century, and the Almoravid Empire, from the eleventh to the twelfth century, were weakened by internecine warfare, and both succumbed to further invasions from the Ghana Empire and the Almohad Empire, respectively.

The one external influence that tended to unify the country was Islam. The Islamization of Mauritania was a gradual process that spanned more than 500 years. Beginning slowly through contacts with Berber and Arab merchants engaged in the important caravan trades and rapidly advancing through the Almoravid conquests, Islamization did not take firm hold until the arrival of Yemeni Arabs in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and was not complete until several centuries later. Gradual Islamization was accompanied by a process of arabization as well, during which the Berber masters of Mauritania lost power and became vassals of their Arab conquerors.

From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, European contact with Mauritania was dominated by the trade for gum arabic (see Glossary). Rivalries among European powers enabled the Arab-Berber population, the Maures (Moors), to maintain their independence and later to exact annual payments from France, whose sovereignty over the Senegal River and the Mauritanian coast was recognized by the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Although penetration beyond the coast and the Senegal River began in earnest under Louis Faidherbe, governor of Senegal in the mid-1800s, European conquest or "pacification" of the entire country did not begin until 1900. Because extensive European contact began so late in the

## *Mauritania: A Country Study*

country's history, the traditional social structure carried over into modern times with little change.

The history of French colonial policy in Mauritania is closely tied to that of the other French possessions in West Africa, particularly to that of Senegal, on which Mauritania was economically, politically, and administratively dependent until independence. The French policy of assimilation and direct rule, however, was never applied with any vigor in Mauritania, where a system that corresponded more to Britain's colonial policies of association and indirect rule developed. Colonial administrators relied extensively on Islamic religious leaders and the traditional warrior groups to maintain their rule and carry out their policies. Moreover, little attempt was made to develop the country's economy.

After World War II, Mauritania, along with the rest of French West Africa, was involved in a series of reforms of the French colonial system, culminating in independence in 1960. These reforms were part of a trend away from the official policies of assimilation and direct rule in favor of administrative decentralization and internal autonomy. Although the nationalistic fervor sweeping French West Africa at this time was largely absent in Mauritania, continuous politicking (averaging one election every eighteen months between 1946 and 1958) provided training for political leaders and awakened a political consciousness among the populace. Nevertheless, when Mauritania declared its independence in 1960, its level of political as well as economic development was, at best, embryonic.

Mauritania's postindependence history has been dominated by regional politics. Morocco and Algeria, vying for regional dominance, have continually influenced Mauritanian politics and fortunes. During the first nine years of independence, the regime of Moktar Ould Daddah was preoccupied with expansionist designs by Morocco, whose military strength constituted a perpetual threat to Mauritania's territorial integrity. This threat was intensified by the support of some of Mauritania's Maure population for unification with Morocco. In 1969, when Morocco finally recognized Mauritania's independence, the Daddah regime responded by breaking many of its extensive economic and military ties to France and establishing closer relations with Arab states, including both Morocco and Algeria.

By 1975 Mauritania had entered the military conflict over the fate of the Western Sahara (see Glossary). Among the inhabitants of this former Spanish territory are the Sahrawis, a group that shares ethnic ties with some of Mauritania's Maure population. The war in the Western Sahara has become a struggle by the Sahrawi

liberation group, the Polisario (see Glossary), for national self-determination. Regionally, however, the war was and continued in 1987 to be a power struggle between Algeria, which supported the front militarily, and Morocco, which occupied the territory. Mauritania's participation in the war began with its claim to and occupation of a southern province in the Western Sahara, an action designed to prevent Morocco from occupying the entire territory. At the same time, the Daddah regime hoped to befriend Morocco by cooperating in the occupation of the Western Sahara.

Politically, from independence until the overthrow of the Daddah regime in 1978, the leadership concentrated on consolidating the power of the ruling Mauritanian People's Party and moving toward a one-party state. The regime also sought to eliminate the friction that resulted from political and social differences between the Maure and black components of the population, which could impede the attainment of national unity. Economically, the Western Sahara war, which coincided with a period of severe drought, dealt a near-fatal blow to Mauritania's development and forced the country to increasingly depend on foreign aid, mostly from conservative Arab countries.

The inability of the Daddah regime to extricate Mauritania from its economic problems and the war led to a military coup d'état in July 1978. During the next six years, the country was ruled by military regimes whose efforts to remain outside the Western Sahara conflict were impeded by the continuing war between Morocco and the Polisario, which spilled over into Mauritania's northern regions. The most durable of the military regimes during that period was led by Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla, who assumed power in May 1979. It survived as long as it did because Haidalla skillfully balanced the factions in his government, which included nationalists, adherents of the Western Sahara liberation cause, and proponents of close ties with Morocco. Toward the end of his regime, however, Haidalla began to arrogate authority at the expense of the other members of the ruling body, the Military Committee for National Salvation. Some of these decisions concerned highly charged political issues, such as the recognition of the Polisario's governing arm, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. The ruling committee also accused Haidalla of corruption and nepotism and decided finally, in December 1984, to depose him. This act reflected Mauritania's delicate and vulnerable regional position and the necessity for its leaders to maintain a neutral position toward the Western Sahara.

## **Early History**

The early history of the west Saharan (see Glossary) region is largely unknown. There are some written accounts by medieval Arab traders and explorers who reached the important caravan trading centers and Sudanic kingdoms of eastern Mauritania, but the major sources of pre-European history are oral history, legends, and archaeological evidence. These sources indicate that during the millennia preceding the Christian Era, the Sahara was a more habitable region than it is today and supported a flourishing culture. In the area that is now Mauritania, the Bafour, a proto-Berber people, whose descendants may be the coastal Imraguen fishermen, were hunters, pastoralists, and fishermen. Valley cultivators, who may have been black ancestors of the riverine Toucouleur and Wolof peoples, lived alongside the Bafour. Climatic changes, and perhaps overgrazing and overcultivation as well, led to a gradual desiccation of the Sahara and the southward movement of these peoples.

In the third and fourth centuries A.D., this southward migration was intensified by the arrival of Berber groups from the north who were searching for pasturage or fleeing political anarchy and war. The wide-ranging activities of these turbulent Berber warriors were made possible by the introduction of the camel to the Sahara in this period. This first wave of Berber invaders subjugated and made vassals of those Bafour who did not flee south. Other Berber groups followed in the seventh and eighth centuries, themselves fleeing in large numbers before the Arab conquerors of the Maghrib (see Glossary).

## **Sanhadja Confederation**

One of the Berber groups arriving in Mauritania in the eighth century was the Lemtuna. By the ninth century, the Lemtuna had attained political dominance in the Adrar and Hodh regions. Together with two other important Berber groups, the Messufa and the Djodala, they set up the Sanhadja Confederation. From their capital, Aoudaghast, the Lemtuna controlled this loose confederation and the western routes of the Saharan caravan trade that had begun to flourish after the introduction of the camel. At its height, from the eighth to the end of the tenth century, the Sanhadja Confederation was a decentralized polity based on two distinct groups: the nomadic and very independent Berber groups, who maintained their traditional religions, and the Muslim, urban Berber merchants, who conducted the caravan trade.

Although dominated by the Sanhadja merchants, the caravan trade had its northern terminus in the Maghribi commercial city

of Sijilmasa and its southern terminus in Koumbi Saleh, capital of the Ghana Empire. Later, the southern trade route ended in Timbuktu, capital of the Mali Empire. Gold, ivory, and slaves were carried north in return for salt (ancient salt mines near Kediet Ijill in northern Mauritania are still being worked), copper, cloth, and other luxury goods.

Important towns developed along the trade routes. The easiest, though not the shortest, routes between Ghana and Sijilmasa were from Koumbi Saleh through Aoudaghast, Oualâta, Tîchât, and Ouadane. These towns along the route grew to be important commercial as well as political centers. The eleventh-century Arab chronicler, Al Bakri, describes Aoudaghast, with its population of 5,000 to 6,000, as a big town with a large mosque and several smaller ones, surrounded by large cultivated areas under irrigation. Oualâta was a major relay point on the gold and salt trade route, as well as a chief assembly point for pilgrims traveling to Mecca. Koumbi Saleh was a large cosmopolitan city comprising two distinct sections: the Muslim quarter, with its Arab-influenced architecture, and the black quarter of traditional thatch and mud architecture, where the non-Muslim king of Ghana resided. Another important Mauritanian trade city of the Sanhadja Confederation was Chinguetti, later an important religious center. Although Koumbi Saleh did not outlive the fall of the Ghana Empire, Aoudaghast and particularly Oualâta maintained their importance well into the sixteenth century, when trade began shifting to the European-controlled coasts.

## **Almoravids**

By the eleventh century, Islam had spread throughout the west Sahara under the influence of Berber and Arab traders and occasional Arab migrants. Nevertheless, traditional religious practices thrived. The conquest of the entire west Saharan region by the Almoravids in the eleventh century made possible a more orthodox Islamization of all the peoples of Mauritania.

The breakup of the Sanhadja Confederation in the early eleventh century led to a period of unrest and warfare among the Sanhadja Berber groups of Mauritania. In about 1039, a chief of the Djodala, Yahya ibn Ibrahim, returned from a pilgrimage to Mecca bringing with him a Sanhadja theologian, Abdallah ibn Yassin, to teach a more orthodox Islam. Rejected by the Djodala two years later, after the death of Ibn Ibrahim, Ibn Yassin and some of his Sanhadja followers retired to a secluded place where they built a fortified religious center, a *ribat*, which attracted many Sanhadja. In 1042 the *murabitun* (men of the *ribat*), as Ibn Yassin's followers

came to be called, launched a jihad, or holy war, against the non-believers and the heretics among the Sanhadja, beginning what later become known as the Almoravid movement. The initial aim of the Almoravids was to establish a political community in which the ethical and juridical principles of Islam would be strictly applied.

First, the Almoravids attacked and subdued the Djodala, forcing them to submit to Islam. Then, rallying the other Berber groups of the west Sahara, the Almoravids succeeded in recreating the political unity of the Sanhadja Confederation and adding to it a religious unity and purpose. By 1054 the Almoravids had captured Sijilmasa in the Maghrib and had retaken Aoudaghast from Ghana.

With the death of Ibn Yassin in 1059, leadership of the movement in the south passed to Abu Bakr ibn Unas, amir (see Glossary) of Adrar, and to Yusuf ibn Tashfin in the north. Under Ibn Tashfin, the Berbers captured Morocco and founded Marrakech as their capital in 1062. By 1082 all of the western Maghrib (to at least present-day Algiers) was under Almoravid domination (see fig. 2). In 1086 the Andalusian amirates, under attack from the Spanish Christian king Alfonso and the Christian reconquest of Spain, called on Ibn Tashfin and his Berber warriors to cross the Strait of Gibraltar and come to their rescue. The Almoravids defeated the Spanish Christians and, by 1090, imposed Almoravid rule and the Maliki (see Glossary) school of Islamic law in Muslim Spain.

In Mauritania, Abu Bakr led the Almoravids in a war against Ghana (1062-76), culminating in the capture in 1076 of Koumbi Saleh. This event marked the end of the dominance of the Ghana Empire. But after the death of Abu Bakr in 1087 and Ibn Tashfin in 1106, traditional rivalries among the Sanhadja and a new Muslim reformist conquest led by the Zenata Almohads (1133-63) destroyed the Almoravid Empire.

For a short time, the Mauritanian Sanhadja dynasty of the Almoravid Empire controlled a vast territory stretching from Spain to Senegal. The unity established between Morocco and Mauritania during the Almoravid period continued to have some political importance in the 1980s, as it formed part of the basis for Morocco's claims to Mauritania. But the greatest contribution of the Sanhadja and the Almoravids was the Islamization of the western Maghrib. This process would remain a dominant factor in the history of the area for the next several centuries.

## **Sudanic Empires and Kingdoms**

Although the Almoravids had substantial contacts with the Maghrib, influences from the black Sudanic kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai played an important role in Mauritania's

history for about 700 years—from the eighth to the fifteenth century. Ghana, the first of the great West African Sudanic kingdoms, included in its territory all of southeastern Mauritania extending to Tagant. Ghana reached its apogee in the ninth and tenth centuries with the extension of its rule over the Sanhadja Berbers. This large and centralized kingdom controlled the southern terminus of the trans-Saharan trade in gold, ivory, and salt.

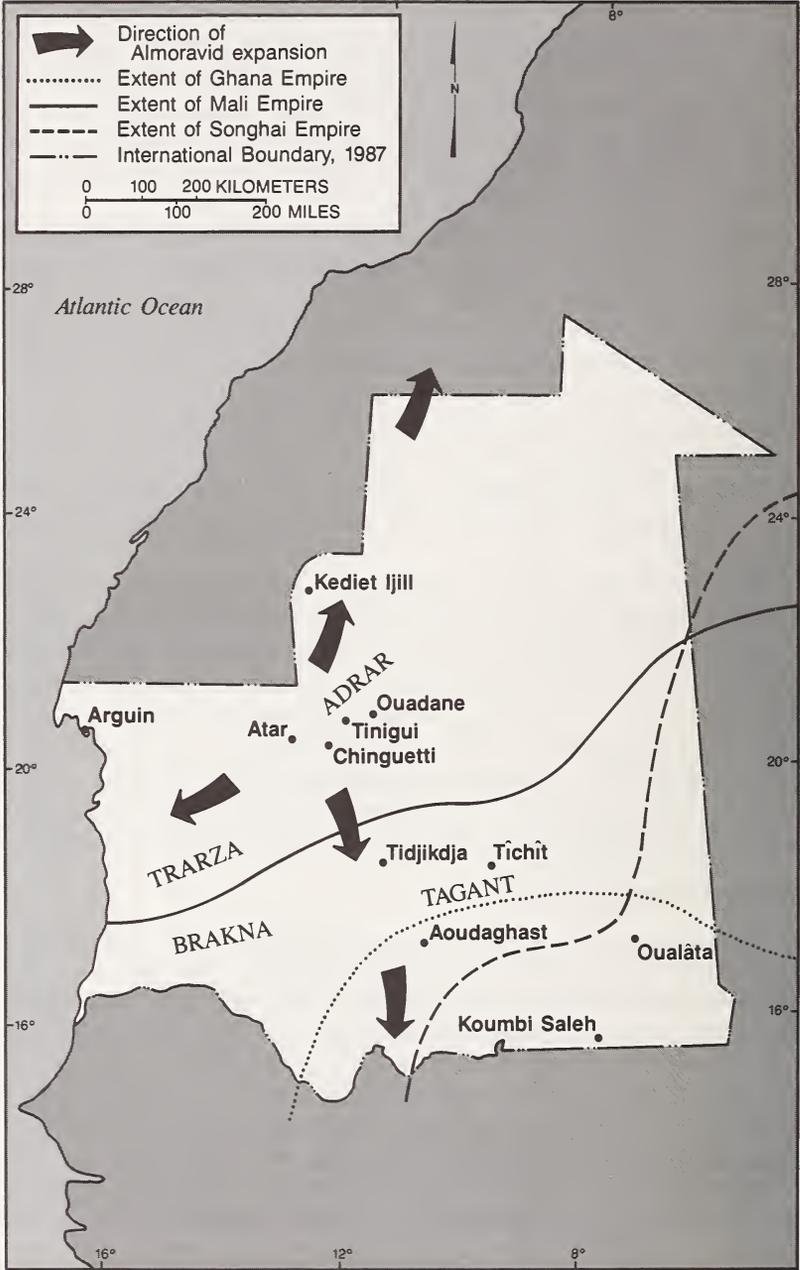
The capture of Koumbi Saleh in 1076 by the Almoravids marked the end of Ghana's hegemony, although the kingdom continued to exist for another 125 years. The Mandé, under the leadership of the legendary Sundiata, founded the second great Sudanic kingdom, Mali. By the end of the thirteenth century, the Mali Empire extended over that part of Mauritania previously controlled by Ghana, as well as over the remaining Sahelian (see Glossary) regions and the Senegal River Valley. Sundiata and his successors took over Ghana's role in the Saharan trade and in the administration and collection of tribute from vast stretches of the Sudan and the Sahel.

The slow decline of the Mali Empire that started at the end of the fourteenth century came about through internal discord and revolts by the inhabitants of vassal states, including the Songhai of Gao. By the end of the fifteenth century, the Songhai Empire had replaced the Mali Empire and extended to Mauritania and the upper Senegal River Valley. At the end of the sixteenth century, a large Moroccan force defeated the Songhai, bringing to an end the seven centuries of domination of the western Sudan (and a large part of Mauritania) by strong, centralized black kingdoms.

## **Arab Invasions**

Beginning with the Arab conquest of the western Maghrib in the eighth century, Mauritania experienced a slow but constant infiltration of Arabs and Arab influence from the north. The growing Arab presence pressed the Berbers, who chose not to mix with other groups, to move farther south into Mauritania, forcing out the black inhabitants. By the sixteenth century, most blacks had been pushed to the Senegal River. Those remaining in the north became slaves cultivating the oases (see *Black Africans*, ch. 2).

After the decline of the Almoravid Empire, a long process of arabization began in Mauritania, one that until then had been resisted successfully by the Berbers. Several groups of Yemeni Arabs who had been devastating the north of Africa turned south to Mauritania. Settling in northern Mauritania, they disrupted the caravan trade, causing routes to shift east, which in turn led to the gradual decline of Mauritania's trading towns. One particular



Source: Based on information from Charles Toupet (ed.), *Atlas de la République Islamique de Mauritanie*, Paris, 1977, 29.

Figure 2. Almoravid and Sudanic Empires, Eleventh to Seventeenth Centuries

Yemeni group, the Bani Hassan, continued to migrate southward until, by the end of the seventeenth century, they dominated the entire country. The last effort of the Berbers to shake off the Arab yoke was the Mauritanian Thirty Years' War (1644–74), or Sharr Bubba, led by Nasir ad Din, a Lemtuna imam (see Glossary). This Sanhadja war of liberation was, however, unsuccessful; the Berbers were forced to abandon the sword and became vassals to the warrior Arab groups.

Thus, the contemporary social structure of Mauritania can be dated from 1674. The warrior groups or Arabs dominated the Berber groups, who turned to clericalism (see Glossary) to regain a degree of ascendancy. At the bottom of the social structure were the slaves, subservient to both warriors and Islamic holy men. All of these groups, whose language was Hassaniya Arabic, became known as Maures. The bitter rivalries and resentments characteristic of their social structure were later fully exploited by the French.

## **Early European Contacts**

Despite the Almoravid domination of Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, there seems to be little evidence of contact during that time between Mauritania and Europe. The inhospitable coastline of Mauritania continued to deter voyagers until the Portuguese began their African explorations in the fifteenth century. Lured by legends of vast wealth in interior kingdoms, the Portuguese established a trading fort at Arguin, southeast of Cap Blanc (present-day Ras Nouadhibou), in 1455. The king of Portugal also maintained a commercial agent at Ouadane in the Adrar in an attempt to divert gold traveling north by caravan. Having only slight success in their quest for gold, the Portuguese quickly adapted to dealing in slaves. In the mid-fifteenth century, as many as 1,000 slaves per year were exported from Arguin to Europe and to the Portuguese sugar plantations on the island of São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea.

With the merger of the Portuguese and Spanish crowns in 1580, the Spaniards became the dominant influence along the coast. In 1638, however, they were replaced by the Dutch, who were the first to begin exploiting the gum arabic trade. Produced by the acacia trees of Trarza and Brakna and used in textile pattern printing, this gum arabic was considered superior to that previously obtained in Arabia. By 1678 the French had driven out the Dutch and established a permanent settlement at Saint Louis at the mouth of the Senegal River, where the French Company of the Senegal River (Compagnie Française du Sénégal) had been trading for more than fifty years.

The Maures, with whom the Europeans were trading, considered the constant rivalries between European powers a sign of weakness, and they quickly learned the benefits of playing one power against the other. For example, they agreed simultaneously to give monopolies to the French and the Dutch. The Maures also took advantage of the Europeans whenever possible, so that when the French negotiated with the amir of Trarza to secure a monopoly on the gum arabic trade, the amir in exchange demanded a considerable number of gifts. Thus began the *coutume*, an annual payment expected by the Maures for doing business with a government or a company. By 1763 the British had expelled France from the West African coast, and France recovered control only when the Congress of Vienna in 1815 recognized French sovereignty over the coast of West Africa from Cap Blanc south to Senegal.

## **French Colonial Administration**

Before the nineteenth century, the European powers in West Africa were interested only in coastal trading; they attempted no important inland exploration and established no permanent settlements (except Saint Louis). The European mercantile companies on the coast were charged with making the highest possible profit. Four such French companies enjoyed an official French-government monopoly of the Senegal River trade from 1659 to 1798. Contact with the Maures and the black inhabitants of the valley came about only in the course of trade. From the beginning, French influence, competing with traditional trading partners north and east of Mauritania, came through Senegal.

In 1825 the new amir of Trarza, Muhammad al Habib, sought to reassert his sovereignty over the French-protected Oualo Kingdom to the south of the Senegal River by marrying the heiress to the kingdom. This action, which French authorities viewed as a hostile threat, combined with the amir's efforts to sell gum arabic to the British, brought a strong French reaction. Although the Maures were able to lay siege to Saint Louis, a large French expeditionary force defeated the amir's forces. The French concluded that to secure the continuing profitability of the gum arabic trade, they would have to forcibly occupy the northern bank of the Senegal River.

Implementing this new policy was Louis Faidherbe, the French governor of Senegal from 1854 to 1861 and from 1863 to 1865. In 1840 a French ordinance had established Senegal as a permanent French possession with a government whose jurisdiction extended over all settlements then effectively under French control, including those in Mauritania. By undertaking the governance of

*Ancient mosque  
in Chinguetti  
Courtesy Mary Pecaut*



these Mauritanian settlements, French rulers directly challenged Maure claims of sovereignty. Under orders from the new government of Louis Napoleon to end the *coutume*, to secure the gum arabic trade, and to protect the sedentary populations of the southern bank from Maure raids, Faïdherbe conquered the Oualo Kingdom. He then turned his attention to the amirates of Trarza and Brakna that had united against him. The Maures attacked Saint Louis in 1855 and almost succeeded in reclaiming the settlement, but they were repulsed and defeated a year later, north of the Senegal River. The treaties ending the war extended a French protectorate over Trarza and Brakna, replaced the *coutume* with a 3 percent annual rebate on the value of gum arabic delivered, and recognized French sovereignty over the northern bank of the Senegal River.

In addition to his military ventures, Faïdherbe sponsored an active program to undertake geographic studies and establish political and commercial ties. In 1859 and 1860, Faïdherbe sponsored five expeditions, including one that mapped the Adrar, to all areas of western and southern Mauritania.

Faïdherbe's successors were content to maintain his gains and did not embark on further military ventures. French colonial policy at this time can best be characterized by the warning given by the Colonial Ministry to the governor of Senegal in the late 1870s, "Let us not hear from you." With France's virtual abandonment of Senegal, the relative calm created in the Chemama (see Glossary) and

southern Mauritania through Faidherbe's efforts came to an end. The Maures resumed their traditional practices of internecine warfare and pillaging villages in the Chemama. In virtual control of the colonial administration, the commercial companies of Saint Louis sold arms to the Maures, while at the same time outfitting French punitive missions. Scientific expeditions into Mauritania became increasingly subject to attack, and their European leaders were killed or held for ransom. The obvious weakness of the French and their distraction with events elsewhere in the region emboldened the amirs to demand and secure the reinstatement of the *coutume*.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, after 250 years of French presence in Mauritania, the situation was little changed. The endemic warfare between different Maure groups may even have increased as French merchants made arms readily available and colonial forces defended camps north of the Senegal River against Maure pillagers. Though formally under the "protection" of the French, the Maures were as fiercely independent as ever.

### **Pacification**

In 1901 the French government adopted a plan of "peaceful penetration" for the administrative organization of areas then under Maure suzerainty. The plan's author was Xavier Coppolani, a Corsican brought up in Algeria, who was sent to Mauritania as a delegate from the French government. Coppolani set up a policy not only to divide, weaken, and pacify the Maures but also to protect them. Although he served in Mauritania for only four years (1901-05), the French called Coppolani the father of the French colony of Mauritania, and the Maures knew him as the "Pacific Conqueror" of the territory.

During this period, there were three marabouts (see Glossary) of great influence in Mauritania: Shaykh Sidiya Baba, whose authority was strongest in Trarza, Brakna, and Tagant; Shaykh Saad Bu, whose importance extended to Tagant and Senegal; and Shaykh Ma al Aynin, who exerted leadership in Adrar and the north, as well as in Spanish Sahara and southern Morocco. By enlisting the support of Shaykh Sidiya and Shaykh Saad against the depredations of the warrior clans and in favor of a Pax Gallica, Coppolani was able to exploit the fundamental conflicts in Maure society. His task was made difficult by opposition from the administration in Senegal, which saw no value in the wastelands north of the Senegal River, and by the Saint Louis commercial companies, to whom pacification meant the end of the lucrative arms trade. Nevertheless, by 1904 Coppolani had peacefully subdued Trarza,

Brakna, and Tagant and had established French military posts across the central region of southern Mauritania.

As Faidherbe had suggested fifty years earlier, the key to the pacification of Mauritania lay in the Adrar. There, Shaykh Ma al Aynin had begun a campaign to counteract the influence of his two rivals—the southern marabouts, Shaykh Sidiya and Shaykh Saad—and to stop the advance of the French. Because Shaykh Ma al Aynin enjoyed military as well as moral support from Morocco, the policy of peaceful pacification gave way to active conquest. In return for support, Shaykh Ma al Aynin recognized the Moroccan sultan's claims to sovereignty over Mauritania, which formed the basis for much of Morocco's claim to Mauritania in the late twentieth century. In May 1905, before the French column could set out for Adrar, Coppolani was killed in Tidjikdja.

With the death of Coppolani, the tide turned in favor of Shaykh Ma al Aynin, who was able to rally many of the Maures with promises of Moroccan help. The French government hesitated for three years while Shaykh Ma al Aynin urged a jihad to drive the French back across the Senegal. In 1908 a Colonel Gouraud, who had defeated a resistance movement in the French Sudan (present-day Mali), took command of French forces as the government commissioner of the new Civil Territory of Mauritania (created in 1904), captured Atar, and received the submission of all the Adrar peoples the following year. By 1912 all resistance in Adrar and southern Mauritania had been put down. As a result of the conquest of Adrar, the fighting ability of the French was established, and the ascendancy of the French-supported marabouts over the warrior clans within Maure society was assured.

The fighting took a large toll on the animal herds of the nomadic Maures, who sought to replenish their herds in the traditional manner—by raiding other camps. From 1912 to 1934, French security forces repeatedly thwarted such raids. The last raid of the particularly troublesome and far-ranging northern nomads, the Reguibat, occurred in 1934, covered a distance of 6,000 kilometers, and netted 800 head of cattle, 270 camels, and 10 slaves. Yet, except for minor raids and occasional attacks—Port-Etienne (present-day Nouadhibou) was attacked in 1924 and 1927—the Maures generally acquiesced to French authority. With pacification, the French acquired responsibility for governing the vast territory of Mauritania.

### **French Colonial Policy**

From the time of the French Revolution in 1789, the two main characteristics of French colonial policy in West Africa were the

quest for international prestige and the cultural assimilation of indigenous populations. France's efforts to build a colonial empire may be considered a reaction to British imperial successes: colonies were a necessary burden the French took on to maintain their international stature. These efforts were always subordinate to the considerations of continental politics. As a result, little attention was paid to the political, social, and economic development of the overseas territories.

The policy of assimilation had its origins in the French Revolution, when the Convention in 1794 declared that all people living in the colonies were French citizens and enjoyed all republican rights. Under Napoleon and the Consulate (1799–1804), the law was soon repealed. In 1848, at the outset of the Second Republic, citizenship rights were again extended, and representation in the National Assembly was provided for the four communes of Senegal (Saint Louis, Dakar, Rufisque, and Gorée). Although these rights were retained by the Senegalese, they did not apply to Mauritania or other French territories in West Africa. Elsewhere in West Africa, although assimilation was the theoretical basis of administration, a policy evolved that shared elements of British colonial practice. For example, Africans were subjects of France, not citizens, and had no political rights or rights of representation. The centralized and direct administration embodied in the doctrine of assimilation was maintained, however, and a functional collaboration between French rulers and an assimilated indigenous elite developed. Although by World War II colonial policy was still labeled assimilationist, only a very few Africans were assimilated. For the majority of Africans, the realities of French colonial policy were far from the spirit of French egalitarianism.

## **French Administration Through World War II**

Mauritania, a long-time appendage of Senegal, was not considered worth the expense necessary to pacify and develop it until Coppolani succeeded in changing the attitude of the French government. In 1904 France recognized Mauritania as an entity separate from Senegal and organized it as a French protectorate under a delegate general in Saint Louis. With the success of the first pacification attempts, the status of Mauritania was upgraded to that of a civil territory administered by a commissioner of government (first Coppolani, later Gouraud). Although formally separate from French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale Française—AOF), which had been created in 1895, Mauritania was closely tied to its administrative structure and had its annual budget appended to that of the AOF. On December 4, 1920, by a decree of the Colonial

Ministry in Paris, Mauritania was officially included in the AOF with the six other French West African territories—Senegal, the French Sudan, Guinea, Ivory Coast (present-day Côte d'Ivoire), Dahomey (present-day Benin), and Niger.

The AOF was organized pyramidally under a centralized federal structure in Dakar. Directly appointed by the president of the French Republic, the governor general of the AOF came to have a great deal of power because of the instability and short duration of Third Republic governments in Paris. The governor general was the head of a centralized administrative bureaucracy consisting of a lieutenant governor for each territory, the commandant of a *cercle* (a colonial administrative subdivision), and chiefs of subdivisions, cantons, and villages. The key figure in the system was the commandant in each *cercle*, who was almost always a European and who was closest to the indigenous population in his duties of collecting taxes, overseeing works projects, maintaining peace and security, and carrying out administrative decrees. Generally, the subdivisions subordinate to the commandant were manned by Africans. For these positions, the French relied to a great extent on the traditional hierarchy of chiefs or their sons. In keeping with their policy of direct, centralized rule, the French made it clear that these African chiefs exercised authority not by virtue of their traditional position but by virtue of their status as modern colonial administrators.

Before 1946 no legislative bodies existed in the AOF. The governor general was assisted by the Grand Council in Dakar, Senegal, which since 1925 had represented the federation's major interest groups (military personnel, civil servants, and businessmen). But the council had only consultative status, and its members were all appointed by the governor general. Similar administrative councils advised the lieutenant governors in all of the territories except Mauritania and Niger.

Mauritania's administrative structure conformed generally with that of the rest of the AOF territories. There were, however, some very important differences. Unlike the other territories (with the possible exception of Niger), most of the *cercles* still had military commandants because of the late date of the territory's pacification. The resultant conflicts between military and civilian authorities caused frequent administrative changes and reorganizations, including shifts in boundaries that tended to create confusion.

The importance of the role of the traditional Maure chiefs in the administration was the most significant difference between Mauritania and the other AOF territories and has probably had the greatest continuing impact. The extent to which administrative

practice in Mauritania contradicted the French policy of direct rule and resembled British indirect rule is noteworthy. From the time of Coppolani, the administration had relied heavily on the marabouts for support and administration. In recognition of the support given by Shaykh Sidiya of Trarza, the French placed the school of Islamic studies at Boutilimit under his control. Traditional administrators of Islamic justice, the *qadis*, were put on the French payroll without supervision, and administrative appointments of chiefs were subject to the approval of the traditional *jamaa* (see Glossary).

In an effort to maintain order throughout the turbulent territory, the French co-opted the leaders of certain warrior groups to serve the administration. Notable among these were the amirs of Trarza, Brakna, and Adrar, the three most powerful men in the colony, who were aided by 50 heads of smaller groups and the more than 800 chiefs of factions and subfactions. Although there was extensive French interference in the operations of the traditional authorities, the traditional social structure of Mauritania was maintained and thrust into the modern world.

With the outbreak of World War II in 1939, France's African territories were called upon to supply troops and provisions for the war effort. After France fell in 1940, Vichy gained control of the AOF and replaced the official policy of assimilation with a policy of racial discrimination in shops, trains, and hotels. Existing democratic institutions were repressed, and the administrative councils were abolished. Elements of French colonial policy, such as the *indigénat* (see Glossary) and forced labor, were abused. The chiefs, on whom the Vichy government in Dakar relied, were increasingly seen as collaborators by their people as war-related demands for agricultural production and forced labor besieged them. Sporadic resistance to these abuses was met with summary punishment.

In recognition of the suffering of the people of the AOF territories during the war and of the AOF's contribution to the war effort of the Free French (at one time more than half the Free French forces were Africans), Free French officials convened a conference in Brazzaville, Congo, in June 1944 to propose postwar reforms of the colonial administration. The conference favored greater administrative freedom in each colony, combined with the maintenance of unity through a federal constitution. It also recommended the abolition of the *indigénat* and forced labor, the establishment of trade unions, the rapid extension of education, and the granting of universal suffrage. The conference was firmly opposed, however, to any concept of evolution outside the French bloc and

called for the full application of the assimilationist doctrine. The Brazzaville Conference was the beginning of great political and social change that was to sweep Mauritania and other French African states to independence in less than seventeen years.

### **Postwar Reforms**

Only slightly developed and long neglected, Mauritania played no role in the rising nationalism in the AOF after World War II. The 1946 constitution of the French Fourth Republic established the former colonies of the AOF as overseas territories of France integrally tied to the French Union. The French administration in Saint Louis retained jurisdiction in criminal law, public freedoms, and political and administrative organization; the Colonial Ministry could still rule by decree, if the decree did not violate a statute. The *indigénat* and forced labor were abolished, and French citizenship was extended to all inhabitants of French territories willing to renounce their local legal status.

Elective representation existed on three levels: territorial, federation (AOF), and national (French). A General Council (renamed Territorial Assembly in 1952) was established in each territory with extensive controls over the budget, but with only consultative powers over all other issues. The Mauritanian General Council comprised twenty-four members, eight elected by Europeans and sixteen elected by Mauritians. Each territory had five representatives, elected from its General Council, on the AOF's Grand Council in Dakar, Senegal, which had general authority over budgeting, politics, administration, planning, and other matters for all of the AOF. Each territory also sent representatives to the National Assembly, the Council of the Republic, and the Assembly of the French Union in Paris.

The franchise created by the 1946 French constitution was small and restricted to government officials, wage earners, veterans, owners of registered property, and members or former members of local associations, cooperatives, or trade unions. Consequently, in the Mauritanian elections of 1946, there were fewer than 10,000 qualified voters. In 1947 individuals literate in French and Arabic were added to the electorate, and in 1951 heads of households and mothers of two children were made eligible. By 1956 suffrage had become universal.

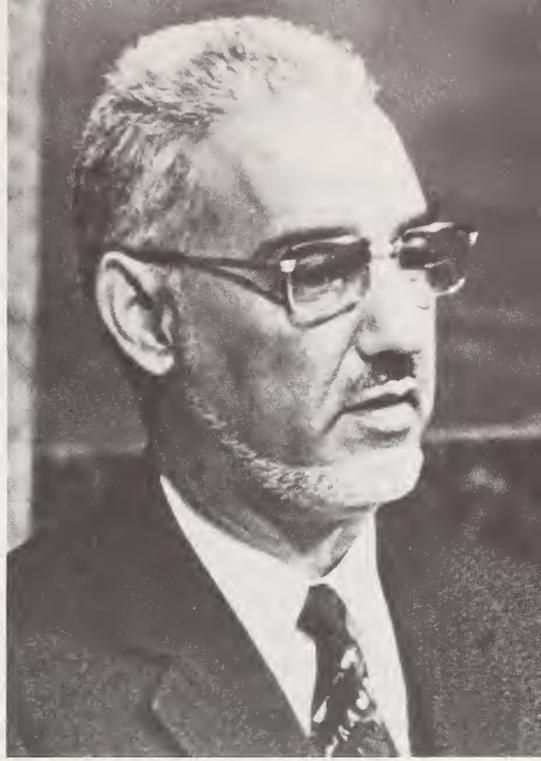
Before 1946 the territory of Mauritania formed one electoral unit with Senegal, which was represented by a single senator in the French Senate. The 1946 constitution, however, separated Mauritania from Senegal politically, giving it a deputy to the French National Assembly. At the same time, the bicameral General

Council, which was reorganized into the unicameral Territorial Assembly in 1952, was established in Mauritania. Nonetheless, political activity in Mauritania was minimal. The territory's first party, the Mauritanian Entente, was headed by Horma Ould Babana, who served as the first Mauritanian deputy to the French National Assembly.

The Mauritanian Entente was founded in 1946 under the auspices of Leopold Senghor and Lamine Gueye of the Senegalese section of the French Socialist Party. Formed specifically for the 1946 election, the Mauritanian Entente was neither well organized nor mass based. Yet on a platform calling for movement toward independence and elimination of chiefdoms, Babana easily defeated the candidate of the conservative French administration and the leading clerics. The new deputy, however, spent most of his five-year term in Paris, out of contact with politics in Mauritania. As a result, on his return for the 1951 elections, Babana was defeated by the Mauritanian Progressive Union, led by Sidi el Moktar N'Diaye and supported by the colonial administration and its allies, the traditional Maure secular and clerical ruling classes, who feared the Mauritanian Entente's "socialist" program. In the 1952 election for members of the Territorial Assembly, the Mauritanian Progressive Union won twenty-two of the twenty-four seats.

The reforms of 1956, or Loi-Cadre (see Glossary), were even more sweeping than those of 1946. In the face of growing nationalism and the development of a political consciousness in the AOF, the Loi-Cadre ended the integrationist phase of French colonial policy and bestowed a considerable degree of internal autonomy on the overseas territories. Universal suffrage and the elimination of the dual college electoral system led to the creation of district and local representative councils and a great enlargement of the powers of the territorial assemblies. Each territory could now formulate its own domestic policies, although the territories continued to rely on France for decisions concerning foreign affairs, defense, higher education, and economic aid.

The most important provision of the 1956 Loi-Cadre was the establishment of a council of government to assume the major executive functions of each territory that until that time had been carried out by a Paris-appointed colonial official. The councils were composed of three to six ministers elected by the territorial assemblies on the advice of the dominant party. Each minister was charged with overseeing a functional department of government. The head of the ministers became vice president of the council and, in effect, if not in title, prime minister. In Mauritania that person was Moktar Ould Daddah, the country's only lawyer and a member of a prominent pro-French clerical family.



*Moktar Ould Daddah,  
Mauritania's first  
head of state*

## **The Road to Independence and the Quest for National Unity**

Mauritania's first government was invested in May 1957 and symbolically chose as its new capital Nouakchott, which by design was situated almost exactly between the Senegal River Valley, populated primarily by black farmers, and the Maure stronghold in Adrar. The choice represented a compromise between these two competing areas. It also set the tone for Daddah's approach to Mauritania's political conflicts: compromise and conciliation for the sake of national unity.

The greatest challenge to national unity was Mauritania's heterogeneous population. As in all the Sahelian states, Mauritania's southern regions were inhabited mainly by peasants who belonged racially and culturally to black Africa, while the population of its northern regions were desert nomads who identified with the Arab world. At independence, Mauritania's estimated 1.5 to 1.8 million people could be divided into three groups: one-third of the inhabitants were both racially and ethnically Maures; another third, although racially black or mixed Maure-black, were ethnically Maures (this group of black Maures was essentially a slave class until 1980, when slavery was abolished); and the remaining third were racially and ethnically black, resembling in many respects the populations in neighboring Senegal and Mali (see Ethnic Groups and Languages, ch. 2).

## *Mauritania: A Country Study*

Achievement of national unity was impeded by the desires of some Maures, mostly from the northern sections of the country, to unite with Morocco, and the countervailing wishes of many blacks to secede from Mauritania and join the Mali Federation. The defeat of the Mauritanian Entente and Babana by the Mauritanian Progressive Union in the elections of 1951 and 1956, which established the Mauritanian Progressive Union's dominance, led Babana and several of his followers in the summer of 1956 to flee to Morocco, where Babana became head of the National Council of Mauritanian Resistance. With the support of many Maures inside Mauritania, this group supported Morocco's claims to Mauritania and, by extension, Morocco's opposition to Mauritanian independence.

To counterbalance the pro-Moroccan sympathies of many Maures, southern minority groups formed a regional party, the Gorgol Democratic Bloc, committed to the prevention of a Maghribi union and to the maintenance of close ties with black African countries. Intellectuals from various black minorities met in Dakar, Senegal, in 1957 and created the Union of the Inhabitants of the River Valley to fight for minority rights against Maure domination.

Further impeding national unity was the inclusion of French officials in the key ministries of finance and economic planning. Daddah was educated in France and, having just returned to Mauritania to form the government, had not been involved in the rivalries and struggle for power. His consequent congeniality toward the French alienated the Association of Mauritanian Youth, an important group that advocated total independence and strict anticolonialism.

In this atmosphere of increasing fragmentation and political instability, Daddah, with the strong support of France, called for unity among all factions. At the Congress of Aleg in May 1958, the Mauritanian Regroupment Party was formed in a merger of the Mauritanian Progressive Union, elements of the Mauritanian Entente that had expelled Babana, and the Gorgol Democratic Bloc. This party was headed by Daddah as secretary general and Sidi el Moktar as president. Its platform called for Mauritania to join the French Community (francophone Africa) and to reject both Morocco's claim to Mauritania and a 1957 French proposal to unite Mauritania with francophone Saharan states in the joint French-dominated Common Saharan States Organization. The platform also proposed the systematic organization within the country of local party committees to involve all sectors of the population in the party. The party's program reflected the three main themes of Mauritanian unity: the rejection of federation with Mali or Morocco under any terms, the principle of balance between Maures and blacks

within the party and government, and the preeminence of Dad-dah as the only person capable of holding the country together.

The Mauritanian Regroupment Party represented a union of modern and traditional elements as well as a balance between north and south. The dominance of traditional elements favoring close ties with France led, however, to the end of unity. Progressive youth leaders, excluded from decision making at the party congress convened at Nouakchott in July 1958, defected and formed a new opposition party, the Mauritanian National Renaissance Party (Nahda) with Ahmed Baba Ould Ahmed Miske as secretary general. The Nahda platform called for total and immediate independence from France and a rapprochement with Morocco. Although the program was designed to rally diverse opposition to the traditional Mauritanian Regroupment Party, the call for rapprochement with Morocco caused Nahda's opponents to label it a Maure party, which cost it the support of the black minorities. But former Mauritanian Entente members, including Babana, supported Nahda. Its anticolonial nationalist platform also attracted many young Maures.

## **Independence and Civilian Rule**

The political crisis in France that saw the birth of the French Fifth Republic in 1958 necessitated a new French constitution. Also adopted by the people of Mauritania in a referendum in September 1958, this new constitution provided for a French Community whose members would be autonomous republics. But status as an autonomous member of the French Community quickly lost its appeal as Mauritania witnessed the wave of nationalism sweeping the African continent. As soon as the Islamic Republic of Mauritania was proclaimed in October 1958, the Territorial Assembly changed its name to the Constituent Assembly and immediately initiated work to draft a national constitution; the document was unanimously adopted by the Constituent Assembly in March 1959 in place of the French constitution, and on November 28, 1960, Mauritania declared its independence.

The molding of a new political entity was a challenge in a country in which the gradual breakdown of a well-entrenched tribal hierarchy and its authority was still under way. Also, Mauritania's predominantly nomadic society did not lend itself to the establishment of administrative agencies; consequently, numerous political parties formed around those leaders who already exercised tribal authority. Most of the population, who observed democratic nomadic traditions—in which influence did not always pass directly from father to son, land was not owned by individuals, and material

wealth was widely distributed rather than concentrated in a few hands—eventually accepted a centralized government.

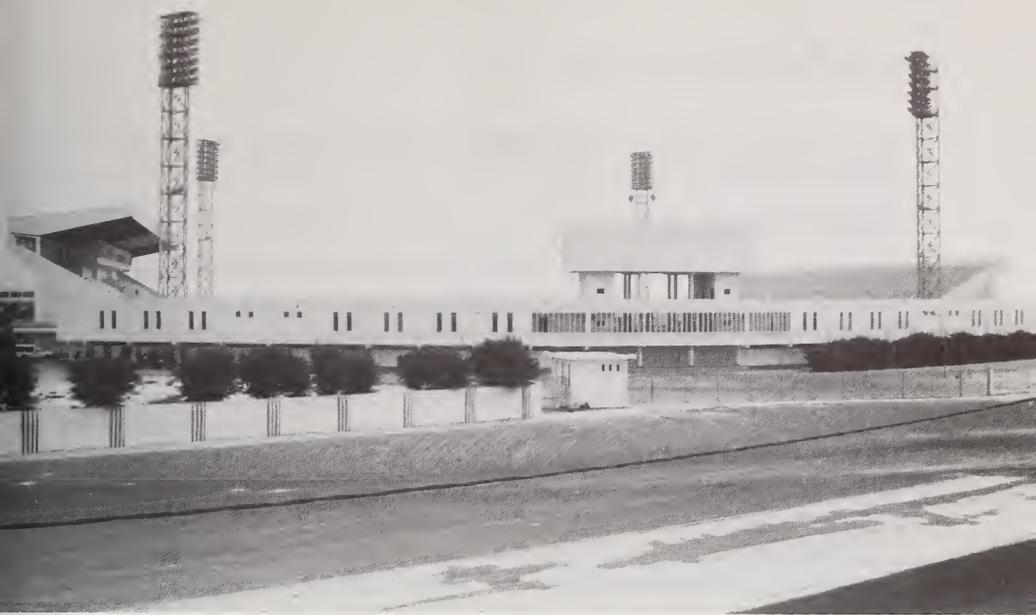
With the advent of independence, party leaders recognized the need to consolidate to ensure the establishment of a strong and independent government that also represented Mauritania's regional and ethnic diversity. Consequently, there was a tendency on the part of some to try to put aside their differences. Daddah was able gradually to gain the support of numerous opposition parties because of his demonstrated willingness to include in his government those who previously had opposed him. Thus, even after Daddah charged Nahda with corruption, banned the party from participation in the elections to Mauritania's first National Assembly in May 1959, declared the party illegal, and placed five of its leaders under arrest, Nahda still responded to Daddah's urgent appeal to preserve unity and independence.

In a new election, held in accordance with provisions of the new constitution in August 1961, Nahda campaigned for Daddah, who won the election with the additional support of the black party, the Mauritanian National Union. The new government formed in September 1961 included representatives of both Nahda and the Mauritanian National Union in important ministries. This electoral, then governmental, coalition was formalized in October 1961 with the consolidation of the Mauritanian Regroupment Party, Nahda, the Mauritanian National Union, and the Mauritanian Muslim Socialist Union into the Mauritanian People's Party (*Parti du Peuple Mauritanienne*—PPM). On December 25, 1961, the PPM was constituted as the sole legal party. Its policies included a foreign policy of nonalignment and opposition to ties with France.

In accordance with the new government's objective of acquiring support from blacks, Daddah included two blacks in his cabinet. Also, the National Assembly, headed by a black, comprised ten blacks and twenty Maures. As a final development in the emergence of a dominant single party, Daddah, the party's secretary general, further concentrated power in his hands. The PPM proclaimed Mauritania a one-party state in 1964, and the National Assembly passed a constitutional amendment in 1965 that institutionalized the PPM as the single legal party in the state. Organized opposition was henceforth restricted to channels within the party.

### **Emerging Tensions**

Tight control of political life by the PPM reinforced the highly centralized system. The imposition of single-party rule over a highly diverse population caused underlying tensions to emerge, especially among the southern black population, who feared Arab domination.



*Chinese-built sports stadium in Nouakchott  
Courtesy Derwood Staeben*

Their fears were exacerbated by the 1966 decision to make the study of Hassaniya Arabic compulsory in secondary schools and the decision in 1968 to make Hassaniya Arabic, as well as French, an official language. Differences over linguistic and racial issues subsequently caused strikes and demonstrations by students and trade unionists in 1968, 1969, and 1971; all demonstrations were harshly repressed by the government, which in 1966 had banned discussion of racial problems. Other tensions existed among black Maures, who were still considered members of a slave class even though slavery had been outlawed under the French and by the Mauritanian Constitution (see Maures, ch. 2).

Political divisions within the trade union movement also erupted, causing the movement to split in 1969 into two factions, one favoring integration into the PPM and the other lobbying for an independent form of trade unionism. The PPM, ignoring the latter faction, integrated the trade unions in 1972. Their action followed a series of strikes in late 1971, including a two-month shutdown of the iron mine operated by the Mauritanian Iron Mines Company (Société Anonyme des Mines de Fer de Mauritanie—MIFERMA). Soon after the integration of the trade unions, an unofficial trade union movement was formed, and in 1973 a clandestine leftist political party, the Mauritanian Kadihine Party (see Glossary), was created. Another clandestine group, the Party

of Mauritanian Justice, was formed in 1974 and called for more political freedom.

### **Time of Radicalization**

In 1969 following Morocco's official recognition of Mauritania, the government pursued a more radical political agenda to reduce its economic dependence on France. The first major step toward this aim was taken in 1972, when the government announced that it would review the agreements signed with France at independence and would sign new, more stringent agreements on cultural, technical, and economic cooperation in 1973. New agreements on military and monetary cooperation were pointedly eliminated, and Mauritania soon declared its intention of leaving the West Africa Monetary Union and its Franc Zone (see Glossary) and introducing its own currency, the ouguiya, with the backing of Algeria and other Arab countries (see Banking and Government Finances, ch. 3). In 1974, MIFERMA, which was controlled by French interests and provided 80 percent of national exports, was nationalized and the name changed to National Mining and Industrial Company (Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière—SNIM). Also in 1974, Mauritania joined the League of Arab States (Arab League). Finally, during the August 1975 congress of the PPM, Daddah presented a charter calling for an Islamic, national, centralist, and socialist democracy. The charter was so popular that both the Mauritanian Kadihine Party and the Party of Mauritanian Justice withdrew their opposition to the Daddah government.

In the early 1970s, the Daddah government made some progress toward achieving national unity and economic independence. These gains, however, were more than offset by the economic hardship caused by a Sahelian drought that lasted from 1969 to 1974. Thousands of nomads migrated to shantytowns outside the cities, increasing urban population from 8 percent of the total to 25 percent between 1962 and 1975 (see Changing Social Patterns, ch. 2). But other problems forced Mauritania's leaders to shift their focus from internal to external events: the decolonization of the neighboring Western Sahara at the end of 1975; the subsequent occupation of that former Spanish territory by Morocco and Mauritania; and the liberation struggle of the indigenous people of the Western Sahara, which embroiled Mauritania in a long and costly war.

### **Conflict in the Western Sahara**

Until the late nineteenth century, the Western Sahara, a land inhabited by the nomadic Sahrawi people, had remained largely free of any central authority. But when competing European

colonial powers embarked on their division of Africa, Spain claimed the Western Sahara. Spain historically had had an interest in the territory, primarily because it lay near the Spanish-owned Canary Islands. In 1884 Spain occupied the Western Sahara and remained until 1976 (see fig. 3).

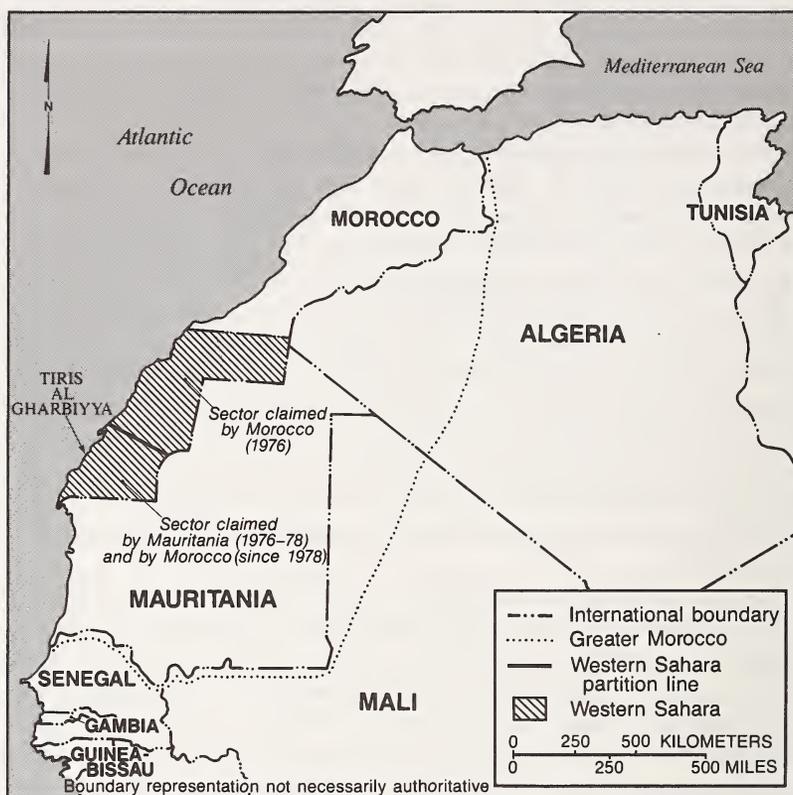
For the first fifty years after the occupation, intermittent Sahrawi resistance to Spanish rule in what was then called the Spanish Sahara effectively forced the Spanish occupiers to limit their presence to several coastal enclaves. It was not until the 1950s, following the discovery of vast phosphate deposits at Bu Craa, that Sahrawi nationalism developed. For the first time, the Spanish Sahara appeared valuable to the indigenous population as well as to the governments of Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania. The discovery of the deposits also renewed the historic rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, both of which encouraged Sahrawi aggression against the Spanish occupiers. In 1973 a number of indigenous Spanish Sahara groups formed an organization called the Polisario, the purpose of which was to secure independence from Spain.

By the mid-1970s, the government of Spain appeared willing to relinquish the territory, which was becoming more costly to administer. In addition, the sudden collapse of Portugal's empire in Africa and the ensuing liberation of Mozambique and Angola had strengthened the determination of the Polisario to shake off Spanish colonial rule, and attacks on Spanish settlements and forts had become more intense. Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria also orchestrated international opposition in the United Nations to continued Spanish occupation. The Spanish government finally terminated its claim to the Spanish Sahara in February 1976 and bequeathed the territory—renamed the Western Sahara—jointly to Morocco and Mauritania, both of which consented to allow Spain to exploit the Bu Craa phosphates. Spain excluded Algeria from the withdrawal agreement, largely because Algeria intended to prevent Spain from exploiting the Bu Craa deposits, a decision which contributed considerably to the growing discord in an already troubled area.

## **Background to Mauritanian Policy**

### *The Moroccan Factor*

Mauritania's role in the Western Sahara conflict was heavily influenced by perceived and real threats of Moroccan expansionism. In the 1950s, Morocco advanced its concept of Greater Morocco, which included all Mauritanian territory, based on an historic (if currently moribund) allegiance to the Moroccan sultan as a political



Source: Based on information from Alasdair Drysdale and Gerald H. Blake, *The Middle East and North Africa*, New York, 1985.

*Figure 3. Territorial Claims in Northwest Africa, 1987*

and religious leader. To make matters worse, most of the Arab League states, the Soviet Union, several progressive African states, and groups within Mauritania, as well, supported that position. For example, Mauritanian Entente leader Babana had claimed that a union with Morocco would protect the rights of the Maures from encroachments by the black population.

Even after Morocco finally had recognized Mauritanian independence in 1969—nine years after it had been granted by France—and had withdrawn its claim to Mauritanian territory, the Dadah government remained suspicious of Moroccan intentions. Thus, Mauritania favored using the Western Sahara as a buffer between it and Morocco, either by controlling all or part of the Western Sahara or by creating an independent state.

### *Internal Factors*

From independence until the mid-1970s, Mauritania's policy on the Western Sahara vacillated as the government sought to balance its own interests against those of a more powerful Morocco. Until 1974 the Daddah government supported self-determination for the Western Sahara, to be exercised by means of a referendum, under the assumption that the Sahrawis would choose to join with Mauritania. This assumption was reasonable: there were close ethnic ties between the Sahrawis and the Maures; a large number of Sahrawi nomads had migrated into Mauritania; and many Maures were living in the Western Sahara. During the period from 1974 to 1975, however, after Morocco had made clear its intention of occupying the Western Sahara, Mauritania pursued policies fraught with contradictions. To please the international community, on which Mauritania depended for economic aid, Daddah continued to support a policy of self-determination for the Sahrawi population. But to please the dominant Maures of Mauritania, the government reintroduced the concept of Greater Mauritania (see Glossary), asserting the country's rights over all of the Western Sahara. A third policy, acknowledging the reality of Moroccan power, called for a partition of the Western Sahara, which led Mauritania into a long and costly guerrilla war with the Polisario.

The Mauritanian campaign to annex Tiris al Gharbiyya (the southern province of the Western Sahara) did not have much support within Mauritania. Some Mauritanians favored instead the full integration of the Western Sahara, while others, who identified themselves as Sahrawi refugees, supported independence. Adamantly opposing absorption was Mauritania's southern black population, which viewed the resultant increase in the number of Maures as a threat. To the blacks, the Western Sahara conflict was an Arab war.

### *Madrid Agreements*

In early 1975, both Morocco and Mauritania agreed to abide by the decision of the International Court of Justice on the status of the Spanish Sahara, but when the court ruled in October 1975 that neither country was entitled to claim sovereignty over the territory, both governments chose to ignore the decision. In November 1975, they concluded the Madrid Agreements with Spain under which Morocco acquired the northern two-thirds of the territory, while Mauritania acquired the southern third. The agreement also included the proviso that Spain would retain shares in the Bu Craa mining enterprise. Mauritania acquiesced to the agreements under

the assumption, probably correct, that Morocco, with its superior military power, would otherwise have absorbed the entire territory.

### **Fighting the Desert War**

In 1976, when Mauritanian troops occupied the Western Sahara province of Tiris al Gharbiyya, as per terms of the Madrid Agreements, they were immediately challenged in fierce fighting with Polisario guerrillas. The fighting would drag on for two years, draining an already impoverished economy, provoking ethnic conflict, and causing large numbers of casualties. The direct cost of Mauritania's colonial venture proved exorbitant. Mauritania rapidly increased its armed forces from only 3,000 at the beginning of 1976 to about 12,000 at the beginning of 1977; by mid-1978 the Mauritanian armed forces numbered between 15,000 and 17,000. Between 1975 and 1977, the government's expenditures increased by 64 per cent, most of which was allotted for defense (see *Defense Budget and the Economy*, ch. 5). This military buildup placed a heavy burden on the weak economy and diverted funds badly needed for development projects. Further alienating the population was a special defense tax, which the government levied against the entire population; despite the tax, the country was on the verge of bankruptcy by late 1977. Moreover, as the war progressed, the power of the Mauritanian military grew, contributing to internal disunity and a weak civilian government unable to solve the problems of nation building.

Having more than 6,400 kilometers of undefended borders with Mali and Algeria, Mauritania was highly vulnerable to attacks by Polisario guerrillas, who were armed and supported by Algeria. The government's inability to protect Mauritania's major towns, even Nouakchott, which was attacked in June 1976, raised fears that Moroccan troops would move into Mauritania, ostensibly to interdict the guerrillas but also as an expansionist vanguard. There was also fear of a possible plan on the part of Morocco's enemy, Algeria, to replace the Daddah government with a puppet regime.

### *Involvement of Foreign Countries*

For their part, Polisario strategists sought first to remove Mauritania from the conflict and then to direct their efforts against the far stronger Moroccan forces. In mid-1977 the Polisario launched a general offensive against Mauritania to cripple its economy and incite internal opposition to the war, hoping thereby that the government either would withdraw from the conflict or would be overthrown by one more sympathetic to the Polisario cause. In May Polisario guerrillas attacked the SNIM operations at Zouërât, killing

two French technicians and capturing another six. The remaining expatriates at Zouîrât immediately left, and Mauritania promptly requested aid from Morocco. In June 1977, Morocco's military command merged with Mauritania's in the Supreme Defense Council, and 600 Moroccan troops arrived to protect Zouîrât. Following further attacks against the railroad linking the SNIM iron ore mines with the port at Nouadhibou, the Mauritanian government reversed an earlier position and requested—and received—military aid from France. In December 1977, French aircraft, in their first action, attacked Polisario guerrillas returning from raids into Mauritania.

Several wealthy Arab oil-producing states, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Abu Dhabi, also provided Mauritania with significant aid to contain the revolutionary fervor advocated by the Polisario. Between 1976 and 1978, Saudi Arabia, in particular, provided funds amounting to twice Mauritania's annual budget.

In spite of the military aid it received, Mauritania was not able to prevent the Polisario from bombarding Nouakchott for a second time, in July 1977. The rocket attack against the capital stunned Daddah, who immediately reorganized both the army and the government, appointing for the first time a military officer to the post of minister of defense. Daddah previously had resisted bringing the military into his civilian government for fear of a military takeover (see *Role of the Military in Society*, ch. 5).

By the end of 1977, Daddah faced growing opposition to the war and to his administration. In the military, black recruits from the south, who had joined the army because they lacked other employment opportunities and who formed a majority of the ground troops, had little interest in fighting Polisario guerrillas in the north. Moreover, black civilians resented having to pay a tax to support a war between Arabs. In addition, many Maure soldiers sympathized with the objectives of the Polisario, with whom they shared ethnic ties. Finally, anti-Moroccan nationalists within the PPM opposed the war on the grounds that it afforded Morocco opportunities to expand its influence.

### ***Overthrow of the Ould Daddah Regime***

Economic hardship also weighed heavily on the Daddah regime. During 1977, defense expenditures increased as international demand for iron ore (Mauritania's major source of foreign exchange) fell. Drought conditions that devastated crops and herds further strained the economy. Mauritania survived only with the help of grants and loans from Saudi Arabia, France, Morocco, and Libya.

In January 1978, during a special congress of the PPM, Daddah unsuccessfully tried to seek a path out of the Western Sahara war; however, the increasingly isolated leader proved unable to undertake any diplomatic or political initiatives. In addition, relations between Daddah and senior army officers were strained because the president constantly shifted senior officers from posting to posting to guard against a possible coup.

In February 1978, in a desperate move, Daddah appointed Colonel Mustapha Ould Salek to be army commander. In the late 1960s, Daddah had relegated Salek, who was suspected of pro-French leanings, to the reserve corps. (Salek had reentered active duty only in 1977, when he was made commander of the Third Military Region, at Atar, and relations between Daddah and Salek were still strained.) On July 10, 1978, the newly appointed army commander led a group of junior officers in the bloodless overthrow of the eighteen-year-old Daddah government.

### **Military Withdrawal from the Western Sahara**

Under Salek, a twenty-man junta calling itself the Military Committee for National Recovery (Comité Militaire de Redressement National—CMRN) assumed power. The CMRN was a centrist, moderate, pro-French and pro-Moroccan regime, whose first mandate was to bring peace to Mauritania. The Polisario, which believed Mauritania would withdraw from the war if given the opportunity, declared a unilateral cease-fire, which the CMRN accepted at once.

Salek and the CMRN then directed its collective diplomatic attention to Morocco, whose troops were still thought necessary to protect SNIM operations and thus enable the Mauritanian economy to recover. Following Morocco's lead, the CMRN opposed the creation of a new, independent state in the Western Sahara, although Salek did not rule out the possibility of a federated state with limited autonomy. In the meantime, while Polisario guerrillas and Moroccan troops continued to fight, the Mauritanian Army withdrew from active participation in the war, although the CMRN was constrained from signing a peace treaty in order to placate Morocco. Within a short time, however, Polisario leaders had become increasingly impatient with Mauritania's inability to make a conclusive commitment to peace, and in April 1979 they demanded the evacuation of Mauritanian troops from Tiris al Gharbiyya as a precondition for further talks.

### **Downfall of Ould Salek**

The difficulties facing the Salek government multiplied and soon proved to be insurmountable. His regime failed to overcome



*Victims of drought in Mauritania  
Courtesy United Nations (Purcell)*

Morocco's resistance to any settlement of the Western Sahara conflict. The death of Algerian president Houari Boumediene in December 1978 further heightened tensions. Also, Senegalese president Leopold Senghor, who was displeased with Salek's ties with Morocco, instigated a press campaign that highlighted racial problems in Mauritania. Salek did little to ease the racial problem when, in March 1979, he named eighty-one Maures and only seventeen blacks to his new national advisory committee. Finally, the French government lost confidence in Salek's ability to extricate Mauritania from both the Western Sahara war and Moroccan influence. Isolated and weak, Salek's government was overthrown on April 6, 1979, by Colonel Ahmed Ould Bouceif and Colonel Mohamed Khouna Haidalla, who formed the Military Committee for National Salvation (Comité Militaire de Salut National—CMSN). Salek, however, was permitted to remain in the government as a figurehead president. In late May, Bouceif was killed in an airplane crash; Haidalla was designated prime minister, and Colonel Mohamed Louly was named president.

### **The Haidalla Regime**

Like its predecessor, the CMSN sought first to negotiate peace with the Polisario without sacrificing its friendly ties with Morocco and France. In its domestic policies, the Maure-dominated CMSN

embittered both black and Maure civilians because it refused to share power with either group. In addition, the government insisted on using Arabic exclusively in the secondary schools, provoking a wave of student protests in April 1979 (see Education, ch. 2).

In July 1979, its patience exhausted, the Polisario ended its ceasefire. Confronted with endless warfare and total economic collapse, the CMSN on August 5 signed a peace treaty in Algeria with the Polisario, according to which Mauritania renounced all territorial and other claims over the Western Sahara. The Polisario, in return, renounced all claims regarding Mauritania. Most significant, Mauritania recognized the Polisario as the sole legitimate representative of the people of the Western Sahara, although in an effort to convince Morocco of its neutrality in the conflict, it did not recognize the Polisario's governing arm, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). The CMSN government also agreed to withdraw from Tiris al Gharbiyya. However, just a few days after the signing of the peace treaty, Morocco occupied Tiris al Gharbiyya, rendering the issue moot and threatening the peace.

### **Consolidation of Power**

In Mauritania, Haidalla was faced with the daunting task of consolidating power. To his credit, in January 1980 he proclaimed Mauritanian neutrality in the Western Sahara conflict and convinced Morocco to evacuate all its troops from Mauritanian soil. From the beginning of his regime, however, Haidalla was viewed with hostility by the southern black population; a native of the Western Sahara, he was perceived by the blacks as an Arab and a northerner. He was also mistrusted by pro-Moroccan political groups because he had signed the peace treaty with the Polisario. To ensure strict Mauritanian neutrality in the ongoing conflict, he reshuffled the top echelons of the government, removing both pro-Moroccan and staunchly pro-Polisario factions. He also assumed the title of president and removed Louly and CMSN vice president Ahmed Salem Ould Sidi from office, thereby eliminating all serious political competitors.

Haidalla initiated several important policy changes to broaden his base of support. In 1980, to further strengthen his position with Mauritania's blacks and to undercut black opposition groups in Senegal, he officially abolished slavery. In December 1980, in the face of growing apprehension among CMSN members, he formed a civilian government, naming Ahmed Ould Bnejara prime minister. He also initiated steps to draft a constitution establishing a multiparty, democratic state.

Among Mauriticians both inside and outside the country, however, political opposition to Haidalla grew. In May 1980, following Haidalla's dismissal of Louly and Sidi, a number of foreign-based opposition movements joined together in France to form an opposition group called the Alliance for a Democratic Mauritania (Alliance pour une Mauritanie Démocratique—AMD). The AMD wanted to restore civilian rule and introduce a multiparty democracy in Mauritania. Its principal political supporter was former President Daddah, who as a result of French pressure had been released from prison in August 1979. Also joining the AMD was former Vice President Sidi. The AMD received financial support from those Arab states of the Persian Gulf that opposed Haidalla's anti-Moroccan leanings—he had moved to eliminate pro-Moroccan members of the CMSN—and his support of self-determination for the radical SADR. The same Arab states also reduced their aid to Mauritania, which only encouraged Haidalla to strengthen ties to more radical Arab countries like Libya and Iraq.

Meanwhile, relations with Morocco continued to deteriorate (see Relations with Morocco, ch. 4). Discord between the two countries had been mounting since early 1981, when Morocco accused Mauritania of sympathizing with the Polisario and harboring its fighters. Morocco was also responsible for rumors suggesting that Libya was shipping arms to the guerrillas via a landing strip at Chegga in northeastern Mauritania. On March 18, 1981, pro-Moroccan members of the AMD led by Sidi and former air force commander Mohamed Abdelkader attempted to topple the government. The coup failed, and both were subsequently executed. In April, following the attempt, Haidalla and the CMSN decided to abandon civilian rule and replaced the fledgling constitutional government with a six-member military government headed by Colonel Maaouiya Ould Sid Ahmed Ould Taya.

As Mauritania's relations with Morocco worsened, its ties with Algeria improved (see Relations with Other States of the Maghrib, ch. 4). Algeria cultivated a friendship with Haidalla and supplied him with sophisticated military equipment, ostensibly to deter invasion from Morocco. In June 1981, in an effort to restore diplomatic relations with Morocco, Haidalla agreed to a summit meeting to be arranged and hosted by Saudi Arabia, one of Mauritania's largest aid donors. At the summit, Morocco's King Hassan II and Haidalla signed an agreement restoring diplomatic relations and prohibiting the transit through either country of forces hostile to the other. This last provision alluded to both the Polisario and the Moroccan branch of the AMD. The reconciliation, however, was short lived. On the one hand, Morocco refused to expel AMD

members, and on the other hand King Hassan accused Mauritania of allowing Polisario guerrillas to launch attacks against Morocco from Mauritanian base camps. Subsequently, Moroccan aircraft bombed the Mauritanian city of Bir Aidiat near the border with the Western Sahara, where Polisario guerrillas had taken refuge, and threatened further reprisals against Mauritania.

In February 1982, former CMSN president Salek and former Prime Minister Bnejara, among others, tried unsuccessfully to oust Haidalla. Having survived a second coup attempt, Haidalla relied on his forceful personality, self-discipline, and integrity to gain the respect of many of his countrymen. The eleven-month period between February 1982 and January 1983 gave the regime the opportunity to politicize the population. Haidalla hoped that by establishing a working foundation of civilian politics he could abolish the military regime and be elected to office as a civilian. Accordingly, in 1982 the government organized what were labeled Structures for Educating the Masses (Structures pour l'Education des Masses—SEM), which acted on a range of public issues through elected delegates. Haidalla also pursued his goal of national reconciliation by releasing some of the political prisoners incarcerated since the overthrow of the Daddah regime.

Domestic peace was shattered briefly in January 1983, first when Haidalla discovered a coup plot supported by Libya and, later, when a Moroccan gunboat attacked a Mauritanian garrison near La Guera, the only Western Sahara territory still occupied by Mauritania (see fig. 11). Although neither incident caused any casualties or serious diplomatic repercussions, the Moroccan attack demonstrated Mauritania's continuing vulnerability (see *Relations with Other States of the Maghrib*, ch. 4). Haidalla responded to these incidents by strengthening relations with France; the latter had already been instrumental in reestablishing communication between the Mauritanian and Moroccan governments following their 1981 break (see *Regional Security Concerns*, ch. 5). The more significant diplomatic movement, however, saw Haidalla develop warmer relations with Algeria and the SADR. During the June 1983 summit meeting of the Organization of African Unity in Ethiopia, Haidalla joined Senegalese president Abdou Diouf and Ethiopian leader Mengistu Haile Mariam in drafting a resolution calling for a cease-fire and peace negotiations in the Western Sahara. Morocco failed to comply with the resolution by the end of the year, and Haidalla recognized the SADR in February 1984.

The January 1983 Libyan-supported coup plot had soured relations between Mauritania and Libya; however, Libyan leader Muammar al Qadhafi, a strong supporter of the Polisario, took

advantage of Mauritania's break with Morocco and began a new campaign to reestablish cordial ties with Haidalla. Haidalla's warming relations with Libya, Algeria, and the Polisario, however, alienated the conservative Arab countries on which Mauritania depended for most of its economic aid and also factions in his own government, which favored ties to Morocco, and those who opposed the existence of the SADR. Moreover, Haidalla angered many CMSN members by his decision to recognize the SADR without consulting them.

More ominous was Morocco's movement of troops toward Mauritania's northern border in the aftermath of Mauritania's recognition of the SADR. The presence of thousands of Moroccan soldiers on the Mauritanian border, only four kilometers from Mauritania's key economic center at Nouadhibou, again raised the possibility of another Moroccan attack on La Guera. In addition, Morocco had begun to construct a berm (see Glossary) near the Mauritanian border that would restrict Polisario guerrillas to Mauritanian territory for their rear bases, thus providing Morocco with justification for attacking northern Mauritania.

### **Political Disintegration**

By 1984 the Haidalla regime was under siege not only for its regional policies but also for corruption and mismanagement, especially within the SEMs, which were viewed by the population as vehicles for advancing the president's own interests. Furthermore, upheavals in the military compromised the loyalty of key officers, particularly at a time when the army was being asked to perform the impossible task of protecting Mauritania's vast northern regions from Morocco's attacks across the border. A severe drought compounded the regime's difficulties, forcing much of the population into the country's few urban areas and increasing Mauritania's dependence on foreign economic aid (see Balance of Payments, Debt, and Foreign Assistance, ch. 3).

In the third ministerial purge in six months, Haidalla named himself prime minister in March 1984 and took over the defense portfolio. Taya, who had held both positions, was demoted to chief of staff of the armed forces. The move infuriated Taya's allies on the CMSN. As chairman of the CMSN, Haidalla was supposed to represent a collective body. Instead, he attempted to amass considerable personal power and alienated many in the top echelons of government. On December 12, 1984, while Haidalla was out of the country, Taya, in a quiet and bloodless coup d'état, became Mauritania's president, a position he continued to hold in late 1987.

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Detailed accounts of Mauritania's early history can be found in Alfred G. Gerteiny's *Mauritania* and Jamil M. Abun-Nasr's *A History of the Maghrib*. More recent literature, however, especially concerning post-World War II Mauritania, is more difficult to obtain. The best resources available on general postindependence political events are *Africa South of the Sahara*, Colin Legum's *Africa Contemporary Record*, and the periodical *Africa Confidential*, although the latter does not always contain the most accurate data. Two articles of special value for their depth of analysis are "The Islamic Republic of Mauritania" by William Eagleton, Jr., and "One-Partyism in Mauritania" by Clement H. Moore.

A wealth of material about the conflict in the Western Sahara, including Mauritania's role in it, is available. One of the best sources for both those with a limited knowledge of the region and those with a more extensive background in North African studies is Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff's *The Western Saharans*. In addition, John Damis's *Conflict in Northwest Africa* provides an in-depth analysis of the conflict and the roles of all those involved. (For further information and complete citations, see Bibliography.)

## Chapter 2. The Society and Its Environment





*Laborer at Oualâta digging slabs of salt, for centuries a valuable commodity of West African trade*

**MAURITANIA'S NINETEENTH-CENTURY** French colonizers envisioned the country as a geographic and cultural bridge linking North Africa and West Africa. In the late 1980s, however, Mauritania bore little resemblance to this vision. Instead, it was a society undergoing profound transformation, torn between two cultural and linguistic traditions. The process of compelling nomads to settle that was begun by the colonial government earlier in the twentieth century was accelerated by the severe drought that began in the mid-1960s. For the next two decades, the rate of urbanization was unprecedented; Mauritania was transformed from a nomadic pastoral society to a predominantly urban one. Large pastoral populations were forced to leave land that could no longer support them. The already-overpopulated cities, almost all of which were located in the far south, were unprepared to receive these displaced populations.

The drought had begun in the mid-1960s, largely as a result of shifting continental rainfall patterns. Of all Sahelian (see Glossary) countries, Mauritania was the most vulnerable because about 75 percent of its land was desert or semidesert under the best conditions.

Although partially offset by continuing high infant mortality rates, population growth during the 1970s and 1980s exacerbated problems of urbanization. Combined with a depressed economy, urbanization and overpopulation contributed to a generally low standard of living. In the 1980s, the government used its meager resources to increase investment in education, housing, and health care services, hoping to reduce the effects of widespread poverty.

In the late 1980s, Mauritania's population continued to be divided along ethnic and regional lines. Maures from the north—whites and black descendants of former slaves who identified with Maure values—made up a traditional elite. The other major group was composed of people of black African ancestry, most of whom lived in the south and identified with the cultural and social values of black Africa. The legacy of Maure domination and enslavement of blacks had been blurred by intermarriage and assimilation into Maure culture; still, the gap between these two groups remained wide, reflecting the weak basis for social cohesion or national consciousness. Social tensions were evident in frequent clashes over state policy, political appointments, and charges of domination, all based on deep-seated cultural antipathies.

In the late 1980s, ethnic tensions further contributed to an unstable social environment. Even the similarities that linked Maures with peoples of African descent were relatively superficial. Religious unity within Islam, for example, masked wide differences in religious observances among Maures and blacks. Government officials hoped that the nation's rapid urbanization might increase social and cultural interaction and reduce prejudices, but most admitted that the task of developing a true national identity and a unified society promised to be long and difficult.

## **Physical Setting**

Mauritania is generally flat, its 1,030,700 square kilometers forming vast, arid plains broken by occasional ridges and clifflike outcroppings. A series of scarps face southwest, longitudinally bisecting these plains in the center of the country. The scarps also separate a series of sandstone plateaus, the highest of which is the Adrar Plateau, reaching an elevation of 500 meters. Spring-fed oases lie at the foot of some of the scarps. Isolated peaks, often rich in minerals, rise above the plateaus; the smaller peaks are called *guelbs* and the larger ones *kedias*. The concentric Guelb er Richat is a prominent feature of the north-central region. Kediet Ijill, near the city of Zouïrât, has an elevation of 1,000 meters and is the highest peak (see fig. 4).

Approximately three-fourths of Mauritania is desert or semi-desert. As a result of extended, severe drought, the desert has been expanding since the mid-1960s. The plateaus gradually descend toward the northeast to the barren El Djouf, or "Empty Quarter," a vast region of large sand dunes that merges into the Sahara Desert. To the west, between the ocean and the plateaus, are alternating areas of clayey plains (*regs*) and sand dunes (*ergs*), some of which shift from place to place, gradually moved by high winds. The dunes generally increase in size and mobility toward the north.

The climate is characterized by extremes in temperature and by meager and irregular rainfall. Annual temperature variations are small, although diurnal variations can be extreme. The harmattan, a hot dry wind, blows from the Sahara throughout most of the year and is the prevailing wind, except along the narrow coastal strip, which is influenced by oceanic trade winds. During the short rainy season (*hivernage*), from July to September, average annual precipitation varies from 500 to 600 millimeters in the far south to 0 to 100 millimeters in the northern two-thirds of the country. Belts of natural vegetation, corresponding to the rainfall pattern, extend from east to west and range from traces of tropical forest along the Senegal River to brush and savanna

in the southeast. Only sandy desert is found in the center and north of the country.

## **Major Geographic and Climatic Zones**

Mauritania has four ecological zones: the Saharan Zone, the Sahelian Zone, the Senegal River Valley, and the Coastal Zone. Although the zones are markedly different from one another, no natural features clearly delineate the boundaries between them. Sand, varying in color and composition, covers 40 percent of the surface of the country, forming dunes that appear in all zones except the Senegal River Valley. Fixed sand dunes are composed of coarse, fawn-colored sand, while shifting (“mobile”) dunes consist of fine, dustlike, reddish-colored sands that can be carried by the wind. Plateaus generally are covered with heavier blue, gray, and black sands that form a crusty surface over layers of soft, loose sand.

### ***Saharan Zone***

The Saharan Zone makes up the northern two-thirds of the country. Its southern boundary corresponds to the isohyet (a line on the earth’s surface along which the rainfall is the same) that represents annual precipitation of 150 millimeters. Rain usually falls during the *hivernage*, which lasts from July to September. Often, isolated storms drop large amounts of water in short periods of time. A year, or even several years, may pass without any rain in some locations.

Diurnal variations in temperature in the Saharan Zone may be extreme, although annual variations are minimal. During December and January, temperatures range from an early morning low of 0°C to a midafternoon high of 38°C. During May, June, and July, temperatures range from 16°C in the morning to more than 49°C by afternoon. Throughout the year, the harmattan often causes blinding sandstorms.

The administrative regions (formerly called *cercles*) of Tiris Zemmour in the north, Adrar in the center, and northern Hodh ech Chargui in the east, which make up most of the Saharan Zone, are vast empty stretches of dunes alternating with granite outcroppings. After a rain, or in the presence of a well, these outcroppings may support vegetation. In the populated Adrar and Tagant plateaus, springs and wells provide water for pasturage and some agriculture. In the western portion of the Saharan Zone, extending toward Nouakchott, rows of sand dunes are aligned from northeast to southwest in ridges from two to twenty kilometers wide. Between these ridges are depressions filled with limestone and clayey

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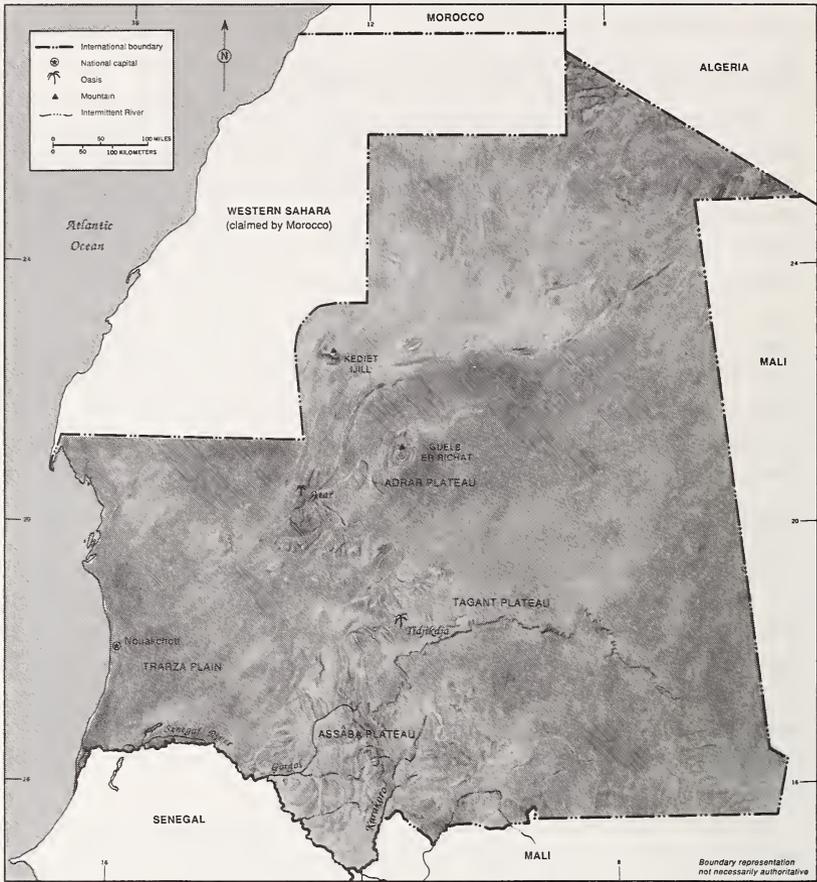


Figure 4. Topography and Drainage

sand capable of supporting vegetation after a rain. Dunes in the far north shift with the wind more than those in the south.

The Saharan Zone has little vegetation. Some mountainous areas with a water source support small-leaved and spiny plants and scrub grasses suitable for camels. Because seeds of desert plants can remain dormant for many years, dunes often sprout sparse vegetation after a rain. In depressions between dunes, where the water is nearer the surface, some flora—including acacias, soapberry trees, capers, and swallowwort—may be found. Saline areas have a particular kind of vegetation, mainly chenopods, which are adapted to high salt concentrations in the

soil. Cultivation is limited to oases, where date palms are used to shade other crops from the sun.

### ***Sahelian Zone***

The Sahelian Zone extends south of the Saharan Zone to within approximately thirty kilometers of the Senegal River. It forms an east-west belt with its axis running from Boutilimit through 'Ayoûn el 'Atroûs to Néma, made up of steppes and savanna grasslands. Herds of cattle, sheep, and goats move across this zone in search of pasturage.

The *hivernage* begins earlier in the Sahelian Zone than in the Saharan Zone, often lasting from June until October. Because farmers and herders depend on annual rains, a delay of one month in the beginning of the rainy season can cause large losses and lead to mass migrations from Hodh ech Chargui and Hodh el Gharbi into Mali. Although temperature extremes are narrower than in the Saharan Zone, daily variations range from 16°C to 21°C. The harmattan is the prevailing wind.

In the northern Sahel, dunes are covered with scrub grasses and spiny acacia trees. Farther south, greater rainfall permits more dense vegetation. Sands begin to give way to clay. Large date palm plantations are found on the Tagant Plateau, and savanna grasses, brushwood, balsam, and spurge cover fixed dunes. Occasional baobab trees dot the flat savanna grasslands of the southern Sahel. Forest areas contain palm trees and baobabs. Before the droughts, vast forests of gum-bearing acacia grew in Trarza and Brakna regions. Farther south, particularly in Assâba and the northern portion of Guidimaka regions, rainfall is high enough to support forms of sedentary agriculture.

### ***Senegal River Valley***

The Senegal River Valley, sometimes known as the Chemama (see Glossary) or the pre-Sahel, is a narrow belt of land that extends north of the Senegal River. Before the droughts of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the belt ranged from sixteen to thirty kilometers north of the river. By the late 1980s, desertification had reached the northern bank of the river in some parts of the valley. The valley is wider in Guidimaka Region and is completely dominated by the seasonal cycle of the river. Almost all of the valley's economically active population engages in sedentary agriculture or fishing along the Senegal River and its main tributaries—the Karakoro and the Gorgol. This area supplies most of the country's agricultural production.

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The climate of the Senegal River Valley contrasts with that of the Saharan and Sahelian zones. Rainfall is higher than in other regions, ranging from 400 millimeters to 600 millimeters annually, usually between May and September. This rainfall, combined with annual flooding of the river, provides the basis for agriculture. Temperatures are cooler and subject to less annual and diurnal variation than in other regions.

The Senegal is the only permanent river between southern Morocco and central Senegal. From its source in Guinea, it flows north and west 2,500 kilometers, reaching the Atlantic Ocean at Saint Louis, Senegal. From its mouth, the river is navigable as far as Kayes, Mali, during the rainy season and Podor, Senegal, during the rest of the year. Heavy rains, beginning in April in Guinea and May and June in Senegal and Mali, bring annual floods. These floods cover the entire valley up to a width of twenty-five to thirty-five kilometers, filling numerous lakes and sloughs (*marigots*) that empty back into the river during the dry season. When the waters recede from the bottomlands, planting begins.

The Senegal River Valley, with its rich alluvial and clayey soil, is comparatively abundant in flora. Moreover, higher rainfall, irrigation, and abundant side channels and sloughs tend to produce a lush, near-tropical vegetation, with baobab and gonakie trees and abundant rich grasses. *Ddownm* and *barussus* palms are also found here. Much of the flood plain is cultivated.

### ***Coastal Zone***

The Coastal Zone, or Sub-Canarian Zone, extends the length of the approximately 754-kilometer-long Atlantic coast. Prevailing oceanic trade winds from the Canary Islands modify the influence of the harmattan, producing a humid but temperate climate. Rainfall here is minimal; in Nouadhibou it averages less than three centimeters annually and occurs between July and September. Temperatures are moderate, varying from mean maximums of 28°C and 32°C for Nouadhibou and Nouakchott, respectively, to mean minimums of 16°C and 19°C.

Battering surf and shifting sand banks characterize the entire length of the shoreline. The Ras Nouadhibou (formerly Cap Blanc) peninsula, which forms Dakhlet Nouadhibou (formerly Lévrier Bay) to the east, is fifty kilometers long and up to thirteen kilometers wide. The peninsula is administratively divided between Western Sahara (see Glossary) and Mauritania, with the Mauritanian port and railhead of Nouadhibou located on the eastern shore (see fig. 11). Dakhlet Nouadhibou, one of the largest natural harbors on the west coast of Africa, is forty-three kilometers long and



*An oasis at the foot of a steep escarpment  
Courtesy Mary Pecaut*

thirty-two kilometers wide at its broadest point. Fifty kilometers southeast of Ras Nouadhibou is Arguin. In 1455 the first Portuguese installation south of Cape Bojador (in the present-day Western Sahara) was established at Arguin. Farther south is the coastline's only significant promontory, seven-meter-high Cape Timiris. From this cape to the marshy area around the mouth of the Senegal River, the coast is regular and marked only by an occasional high dune.

On coastal dunes, vegetation is rare. At the foot of ridges, however, large tamarisk bushes, dwarf acacias, and swallowworts may be found. Some high grass, mixed with balsam, spurge, and spiny shrubs, grows in the central region. The north has little vegetation.

### **Expansion of the Desert**

The climate has altered drastically since the onset of the prolonged drought in the 1960s, part of a recurrent pattern of wet and dry cycles common to Sahelian Africa. Experts agree, however, that overgrazing, deforestation, denuding of ground cover around wells, poor farming methods, and overpopulation have aggravated the drought. In Mauritania the isohyet indicating annual rainfall of 150 millimeters—considered the minimum for pastoralism—has shifted southward about 100 kilometers to a point well south of Nouakchott. During the 1980s, the desert was advancing southward

at an estimated rate of six kilometers a year. Each major climatic zone had shifted southward, and in some cases near-desert conditions had reached the banks of the Senegal River.

By the late 1980s, desertification had fundamentally altered agropastoral and human settlement patterns (see Population, this ch.). Loss of ground cover in the Sahelian Zone had driven animals and people southward in search of food and water and had given rise to new fields of sand dunes. The advancing dunes threatened to engulf wells, villages, and roads; they had even invaded Nouakchott on their march to the sea. The government secured international help to stabilize the dune field around Nouakchott and planted 250,000 palm trees to create a barrier against the encroaching desert. To further combat desiccation, the government constructed dams on the Senegal River and its tributaries to increase the amount of cultivable acreage (see Farming, ch. 3).

## **Population**

Like many developing countries, Mauritania was unable to compile accurate demographic statistics during its first decades of independence. The official census of December 1976 enumerated over 1.4 million people, including a nomadic population of about 513,000. Based on these figures, the 1987 population was estimated at 1.8 million, of which about 50.25 percent were females and 49.75 percent were males. The government estimated annual population growth at 1.6 percent during the 1970s, but United Nations (UN) estimates placed growth at 2.9 percent between 1975 and 1985. The 2.9 percent rate projected Mauritania's population size in the year 2000 to be nearly 2.5 million people. This rate of growth, although lower than that of many other African countries, was expected to rise during the 1990s.

The crude birth rate for the years 1980 through 1985 was 50.1 per 1,000 population according to UN estimates, an increase over the 45.1 per 1,000 ratio observed in 1965. The crude death rate declined from 28 per 1,000 population in 1965 to 20.9 per 1,000 population in 1980. Infant mortality was estimated at 137 deaths per 1,000 births. Life expectancy was 42.4 years for men and 45.6 years for women. Infant mortality was higher and life expectancy lower than the average for Third World countries in the mid-1980s. Like many developing countries, Mauritania's population was young: in 1985 an estimated 72 percent was under thirty years of age, and 46.4 percent was under fifteen years of age.

Based on UN estimates, average population density in 1987 was 1.8 people per square kilometer—by far the lowest level in West Africa. The population also was unevenly distributed. The 1976



*Village buried by sand in 1973*  
Courtesy UNICEF (Maggie Murray-Lee)

census showed that 85 percent of all Mauritians lived south of  $18^{\circ}$  north latitude—a line running roughly east from Nouakchott. Migration toward the south continued throughout the 1980s. Population density varied from 0.1 per square kilometer in the Saharan Zone to more than 35 per square kilometer in densely settled parts of the Senegal River Valley.

Mauritania's population underwent dramatic changes as a consequence of drought and migration during the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1960s, pastoral nomads (mostly Maures) and sedentary agriculturists (mostly blacks) constituted more than 90 percent of the population. At that time, urbanization was at a very low level. By the mid-1980s, however, observers estimated that less than 25 percent of the population was still nomadic or seminomadic, whereas the urban population was about 30 percent and the remainder, sedentary farmers or small town dwellers. Many other factors also contributed to this shift in settlement patterns and livelihood, including long-term efforts by colonial and independent governments to settle the nomads and new employment opportunities associated with mining and export industries.

These trends, accelerated in the 1980s, fostered rates of urbanization that the World Bank (see Glossary) placed among the highest in Africa. In 1984 observers estimated that at least 30 percent of the population (more than 500,000 people) were urban dwellers,

not counting temporary residents displaced by drought. In mid-1985 the World Bank raised this estimate to 40 percent, following a further two-year period of extreme drought. Counting both resident and temporary urban dwellers, some sources in the late 1980s placed Mauritania's urban population at or above 80 percent.

In the mid-1980s, Nouakchott was home to an estimated 400,000 to 500,000 inhabitants. Nouadhibou's population numbered 50,000 to 70,000; Zouïrât's, about 50,000. Other cities, such as Atar, Kaédi, Rosso, and Néma, had doubled or tripled in size between 1970 and 1985.

More than any other locale, Nouakchott illustrated the problems brought about by rapid and uncontrolled urbanization. Originally a small administrative center, it had about 30,000 inhabitants in 1959 and more than 40,000 by 1970. During the 1970s, the city grew at a rate of 15 to 20 percent a year; rapid expansion persisted into the mid-1980s. Only about one-tenth of the city's population had access to adequate housing and services. Water and housing shortages were especially severe. Many of the recent arrivals lived in the *kébés* (shantytowns) that sprang up around the capital. In 1983 a French researcher calculated that 40 percent or more of Nouakchott's population lived in *kébés*; by 1987 that percentage had increased.

The Mauritanian government sought international assistance to cope with the population problem. It also attempted to reverse the influx of people to the cities by offering land, seeds, and transport to families willing to return to the countryside and resume farming. A relocation incentive program was launched in 1985, but because of persistent drought its prospects were difficult to gauge.

Despite massive unemployment, a substantial number of foreigners—as much as 15 percent of the modern sector work force—were needed to meet the demand for skilled labor. At the same time, at least 600,000 Mauritians sought work outside their homeland, mainly in West Africa, the Middle East, and Western Europe. Mauritanian traders, for example, were involved in petty commerce in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire and sometimes traded as far away as Central Africa. Maures sometimes sought employment in the Arab petroleum-producing states, whereas black Mauritians most often sought work in France. Each year from January to July, when there was little need for cultivators and harvesters in Mauritania, large numbers of workers (mostly blacks) sought jobs in Senegal and Mali.

## **Ethnic Groups and Languages**

In 1987 six ethnic groups inhabited Mauritania: one of primarily Arab-Berber (Maure) descent and the others of black African

descent. In 1978 the government estimated that 70 percent of the population was of Arab or Berber descent and 30 percent of black African descent. Blacks, however, rejected the government's figures, claiming their number was much higher. In any case, the lack of reliable demographic data and a long tradition of interracial marriage had blurred ethnic boundaries and made attempts at ethnic identification imprecise.

The Arab-Berber population encompassed peoples of North African origins, most of whom were nomadic or seminomadic and who were unified primarily through the use of various dialects of Hassaniya Arabic. Hassaniya is derived from the beduin Arabic spoken by the Bani Hassan tribe, which extended its authority over most of the Mauritanian Sahara between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries (see *Arab Invasions*, ch. 1). Hassaniya is not closely related to other North African variants of Arabic, probably because the Arab invaders of this southwestern portion of the Sahara remained relatively isolated from the great Berber tribes of the northern Sahara. The primary differences among the numerous dialects of Hassaniya are phonetic.

The remainder of the population in 1987 comprised several groups of varied African ancestry. Most were sedentary agriculturists who spoke African languages. Family and kinship groups were the predominant social units. As elsewhere in Africa, kinship groups were preserved by interaction and social support, shared religious observances, and rituals celebrating stages of the life cycle of individuals. The sharing of rituals reinforced group solidarity and the values the kinship system embodied.

Traditionally, one of the most common kinship groups throughout Mauritania was the lineage, or descent group. Lineage organization is based on the belief that relationships traced through males differ substantially from those traced through females. The patrilineage, which traces descent through male forebears to a male ancestor, is the most common unit of social organization in Africa; matrilineages trace descent through female forebears to one female ancestor. Both types of lineages include men and women, sometimes five or six generations removed from the founding ancestor, but the linking relatives are of one gender.

Lineages generally share responsibility for socializing the young and maintaining conformity to social norms. Lineage elders often meet to settle disputes, prescribe or enforce rules of etiquette and marriage, discuss lineage concerns, and preserve the group itself.

Lineage ties emphasize the unity of living and deceased relatives by descent through ritual observances and ceremonies. At times, however, lineages break apart, either because of interpersonal

rivalries or because they become too large to maintain close ties. When such fission occurs, related lineages usually maintain some ties and celebrate some occasions together. If their alliance is important enough to be preserved for several generations, the resulting confederation of lineages, usually termed a clan, often includes thousands of individuals and may become a powerful interest group in the context of a nation. In Mauritania, many aspects of lineage behavior and expectation are important, providing lineage members with a sense of history and social responsibility and defining the role of the individual in society.

### **Maures**

Maures trace their ancestry to Arab-Berber origins, although many have intermarried among African populations over the centuries. Maures occupy scattered areas across West Africa from southern Morocco to Gambia and from the Atlantic Ocean to Mali. The greatest concentration of this group is in Mauritania, which took its name from this dominant segment of its population.

Maure society's complex social relationships are based on rigid hierarchical social and ethnic divisions. Social distinctions reflect the interplay of heritage, occupation, and race. Broadly speaking, Maures distinguish between free and servile status on the one hand and between nobles, tributaries, artisans, and slaves on the other hand. Non-Maure populations, termed "black Africans" in this context, are not included in this ranking system.

Two strata, the warriors (*hassani*) and the religious leaders (*zawaya*), dominate Maure society. The latter are also known as marabouts (see Glossary), a term applied by the French. These two groups constitute the Maure nobility. They are more Arab than Berber and have intermarried little with black African populations. Tributary vassals (*zenaga*) are below the *hassani* and *zawaya* in status but nevertheless are considered among the elite. They are descendants of Berbers conquered by Arabs, and their Hassaniya Arabic dialect shows a greater Berber influence. Although these three social strata are termed "white" Maures (*bidan*), the *zenaga* have intermarried with other groups to a greater degree than have the *hassani* and *zawaya*.

Craftsmen and artisans in Maure society are described as members of "castes" because they form closed groups whose members tend to intermarry and socialize only among themselves. Bards or entertainers, called *ighyuwa* in Mauritania and *griots* elsewhere in West Africa, are also considered to be members of a caste. At the bottom of the social order are the so-called "black" Maures, previously the servile stratum within Maure society.

*People on the street in Nouakchott  
Courtesy Larry Barrie*



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Myths of origin are used to reinforce perceptions of social status and justify elements of this elaborate system of stratification. Craftsmen and musicians in Maure society are said to be of Semitic (Arab) rather than Berber or African ancestry. Imraguen fishermen, a caste group living in the vicinity of Nouadhibou, are thought to be descended from the Bafour, the aboriginal black population who migrated south ahead of the expanding desert. Small hunting groups are considered to be the remnants of an earlier Saharan people and may be of Berber origin.

### *White Maure Nobility*

In Mauritania the warrior and marabout elites have developed a symbiotic relationship. Traditionally, warrior tribes protected the unarmed religious leaders, while the marabouts provided political, spiritual, and moral support for the warriors (see Arab Invasions, ch. 1). Under French rule, most warrior tribes were pacified and became cattle herders and traders. Even though the warriors' role changed gradually from one of physical protection to one of political and economic control, the alliance of traditional warrior groups with associated religious tribesmen survived.

### *Zenaga*

The *zenaga*, now the descendants of tributary vassals of the nobility, tend to be ethnically and culturally more Berber than the *hassani* and *zawaya*. They, too, are divided into warrior and religious tribes; but they traditionally were assistants to the nobles, often as slaves. The *zenaga* still work for the nobility, raising their livestock and looking after their families.

Traditionally, the *zenaga* paid both individual and group tribute to their noble patrons. Although the French colonial administration banned tribute (*coutume*), in some areas payment survived as late as the 1960s. Individual tribute took the form of military or educational services; group tribute was in the form of goods.

### *Artisans and Entertainers*

The two most prominent occupational castes in Maure society are skilled craftsmen (or artisans) and entertainers (or storytellers). Artisans practice blacksmithing and ironworking, jewelrymaking, woodworking, tanning and leatherworking, pottery-making, shoemaking, weaving, and tailoring. All crafts but weaving and tailoring are performed by men. Although the *hassani*, *zawaya*, and *zenaga* regard artisans as their inferiors, the elite values their products and services, and craftsmen are sometimes allowed to live among the elite on a nearly equal basis.

Entertainers, poets, and musicians constitute a special group. Maure society, like most Islamic societies, places a high value on poetry and music. At the same time, some Maures fear poets and musicians, to whom they attribute occult knowledge and mystical powers that can be physically or politically threatening. Accordingly, noble families often become the patrons of entertainers; thus, the nobles are able to demonstrate their elite status while obtaining both entertainment and protection. Fishermen, salt miners, and nomadic hunters are economically and socially marginal to Mauritanian society and are generally considered outside the caste system.

### *Black Maures*

Black Maures distinguish themselves from "black Africans" to emphasize their cultural affinities with white Maures and their cultural distance from sub-Saharan Africa. In most cases, their forebears were incorporated into Maure society as slaves. Maure society continued to accept the institution of slavery even after independence in 1960, but it customarily distinguished among three types of servile status: full slaves, part-slaves, and former slaves now freed, called *harratin* (sing., *hartani*—see Glossary). Conditions of servitude varied from benevolent to callous and cruel. White Maures had full rights over their slaves, including the right to sell or relocate them. Slaves sometimes earned or were granted their freedom.

Slavery has been outlawed several times, most recently in 1980 (see *The Haidalla Regime*, ch. 1). The term for slave, *abd*, was officially replaced with the term for freedman, *hartani*, but black Maures continued to be considered a slave class. Their status and role in Maure society have changed little. Many Maures continued to hold slaves and exercise their traditional prerogatives even after official decrees outlawed these practices.

Islamic law requires Muslim slaveholders to free their slaves by the fifth generation. Freedmen, however, usually remained in the camp of their former master and filled the same servile role. Whether as slaves or freedmen, black Maures tended their masters' animals, acted as household servants, worked in the palm groves or millet fields, or gathered the crop of gum arabic (see Glossary).

### *Maure Kinship and Marriage*

The principal Maure kinship group is the patrilineage. Among sedentary Maures, the smallest segment of the patrilineage is a group of related males who, with their wives, sons, and unmarried daughters, constitute the extended family. Among nomadic groups, the significant unit is the camp group, consisting of several related lineage units and their extended families. The clan,

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the subtribe, and the tribal unit are groups of increasingly greater inclusiveness, each of which in principle is organized on the basis of patrilineal descent.

Marriage is almost always within the same clan, and lineages are endogamous as well. Islamic marriage prescriptions are generally followed, with the preferred marriage pattern between first cousins and strict prohibitions on marriage between other, specified relatives. In general, tradition emphasizes marriage within the lineage first, then within one's social level.

Polygyny is accepted among most Maure groups, but relatively few Maures actually have more than one wife at a time. Successive marriages are common, however, especially among elite. Marriage to a widow or a divorced woman entails a lower bride-price than a first marriage. Although levirate (marriage of a widow to her deceased husband's brother) is permitted, widows generally live with one of their sons rather than remarry.

### **Black Africans**

Of the five major black African ethnic groups in Mauritania, the largest is the Toucouleur, an offshoot of the Fulbe. The Fulbe are the second largest black African group in the country. Other significant black African groups include the Soninké, Wolof, and Bambara. Small groups of other ethnic Africans also live in the far south of Mauritania.

Like Maures, most Fulbe are nomadic. Most other African groups practice sedentary agriculture in the Senegal River Valley. Almost all have kin in Senegal or Mali. They speak Fulfulde or West Atlantic languages within the Niger-Congo language family.

Black African society, like Maure society, is highly stratified. The overall system of social stratification is nearly identical for all black groups. Three classes predominate: nobles, endogamous castes, and a servile class. Further social distinctions are recognized on the basis of livelihood, prestige, and power. Castes of skilled craftsmen are organized on the same occupational basis as among the Maures. Slaves and former slaves compose the servile group, but as within Maure society, they are accepted as part of a family and enjoy relatively humane treatment.

### *Toucouleur*

The Toucouleur, also called the Halpularen, differ from the Fulbe primarily in terms of livelihood and dialect. Most Toucouleur live along the Senegal River in Mauritania and Senegal. As founders of the ancient kingdom of Takrur, they incorporated a number of

local peoples, including the Wolof and Soninké, into their society. The Toucouleur speak Fulfulde, a dialect of Pulaar (the language of the Fulbe) that includes many borrowings from their neighbors and differs from Pulaar in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax. Most Toucouleur are sedentary farmers, in contrast with the nomadic Fulbe.

In addition to nobles, freemen, artisans, and slaves or former slaves, the Toucouleur also recognize social groupings based on age. Called *fedde*, these age-groups are involved in a number of rituals designed to ensure solidarity and pledges of friendship between families. Descent is patrilineal, and the patrilineage is the most important kinship group. Nonetheless, maternal kin also play important roles at critical points in an individual's life.

The Toucouleur are Muslim, and, like many of their neighbors, they believe in divination and supernatural power (*baraka*) associated with Islamic holy men. They are members of the Tijaniya Islamic brotherhood (see Religious Life, this ch.).

### *Fulbe*

The Fulbe of Mauritania are part of the larger Fulbe population that inhabits scattered areas across the African savanna from Senegal to Sudan. They are thought to have originated in Senegal and to have slowly migrated eastward to their present locations over the last 800 years. Known by a variety of names, including "Peul" in Senegal and "Fulani" in Nigeria, they call themselves "Pullo" (sing.) or "Fulbe" (pl.) in Mauritania. Their Fulfulde dialect belongs to the West Atlantic subfamily of the Niger-Congo language family. It is a rich and flexible language with a well-developed body of oral literature. The Fulbe are Muslims, but the manner in which they observe Islam varies.

Pastoral Fulbe are famed for their herds of cattle and dairy produce. Much of their culture centers on their pastoral life-style. The basic social unit is the nuclear family; the nuclear families are organized into lineages and clans. Descent is patrilineal, and the household unit is usually the patrilocal extended family. Marriage is legitimized by the payment of a bride-price, and great value and prestige are placed upon childbearing.

### *Soninké*

The Soninké in Mauritania are the westernmost branch of the large and widely dispersed Soninké people (also called the Sarakolé), most of whom live in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire. They inhabit the banks of the Senegal River in south-central Mauritania, where they engage in agriculture and trading. Their ancestors

were the founders of the ancient kingdom of Ghana. Some Mauritanian Soninké speak Azayr, a Soninké dialect heavily influenced by Berber; however, most speak the languages of the peoples among whom they live. They are fervent Muslims.

Soninké society is rigidly stratified, allowing for little social mobility. Descent, inheritance, and succession to kin-group and family authority are all patrilineal, and the household unit is the patrilocal extended family. Polygyny is permitted, but the extent to which it is practiced among the Soninké in Mauritania is not clear. Bride-price is a well-established custom, and folklore and ritual are integral to Soninké life.

### *Wolof*

A relatively small number of Wolof live in Mauritania. Most live in Senegal, where they are the dominant group. The Wolof language comprises several dialects and has borrowed many words from Arabic and various European languages. Almost all Wolof are Muslims, and nearly all belong to one of several Islamic brotherhoods. Farming and trading are the basis of their livelihood.

Descent is reckoned patrilineally, but close ties also are maintained with maternal kin. The basic social unit is the extended family. Perhaps one-fourth of all Wolof households are polygynous. Social stratification is fairly rigid, intermarriage across ethnic boundaries at the same stratum being far more common than intermarriage across strata.

### *Bambara*

Only a small number of Bambara live in Mauritania; most reside in Mali. They are thought to be descended from the founders of the thirteenth-century kingdom of Mali. Their language, Mandékan, is closely related to nearby languages. Many are Muslims, the number of adherents varying widely by group and locale. Most Bambara are farmers.

The Bambara recognize occupational castes and the institution of domestic slavery, as do their West African neighbors. They recognize patrilineal descent, and they practice polygyny. The normal household unit is the extended family.

## **Religious Life**

Virtually all Mauritians are Sunni Muslims. They adhere to the Maliki (see Glossary) rite, one of the four Sunni schools of law. Since independence in 1960, Mauritania has been an Islamic republic. The Constitutional Charter of 1985 declares Islam the state religion and sharia the law of the land (see Governmental Power, ch. 4).

Islam first spread southward into West Africa, including Mauritania, with the movement of Muslim traders and craftsmen and later with the founders of Islamic brotherhoods. Although the brotherhoods played a role in the early expansion of Islam, it was not until the nineteenth century that these religious orders assumed importance when they attempted to make religion a force for expanding identities and loyalties beyond the limits of kinship. The relative peace brought to the area by the French administration and the growing resentment of colonial rule contributed to the rapid rise in the power and influence of the brotherhoods. In recent decades, these orders have opposed tribalism and have been an indispensable element in the growth of nationalist sentiment.

### **Origins of Islam**

In A.D. 610, Muhammad, a prosperous merchant of the Arabian town of Mecca, began to preach the first of a series of revelations said to have been granted him by God (Allah) through the agency of the archangel Gabriel. The divine messages, received during solitary visits into the desert, continued during the remainder of his lifetime.

Muhammad denounced the polytheistic paganism of his fellow Meccans, his vigorous and continuing censure ultimately earning him their bitter enmity. In 622 he and a group of his followers were forced to flee to Yathrib, which became known as Medina (the city) through its association with Muhammad. The flight (*hijra*) marked the beginning of the Islamic Era and the entrance of Islam as a powerful force on the stage of history; indeed, the Muslim calendar begins with the year 622. In Medina, Muhammad continued his preaching, ultimately defeated his detractors in battle, and consolidated the temporal and spiritual leadership of most Arabs in his person before his death in 632.

After Muhammad's death, his followers compiled those of his words that were regarded as coming directly from God in a document known as the *Quran*, the holy scripture of Islam. Other sayings and teachings of the Prophet, as well as the precedents of his personal behavior as recalled by those who had known him, became the *hadith* (sayings). From these sources, the faithful have constructed the Prophet's customary practice, or *sunna*, which they endeavor to emulate. Together, the *Quran*, *hadith*, and *sunna* form a comprehensive guide to the spiritual, ethical, and social life of the faithful in most Muslim countries.

Islam in a short time was transformed from a small religious community into a dynamic political and military authority. By the early eighth century A.D., Muslim conquerors had subdued the coastal

population of North Africa, but widespread conversion of the nomads of the central and western desert did not come until after large-scale invasions of the eleventh century by beduin tribes from Arabia and Egypt (see Almoravids, ch. 1). As Islam spread westward and southward in Africa, various elements of indigenous religious systems became absorbed into and then altered strictly Islamic beliefs. For example, the Islamic tradition includes provisions for a variety of spirits and supernatural beings, as long as Allah is still recognized as the only God. Muslims in Mauritania believe in various lesser spirits apparently transformed from pre-Islamic faiths into Islamic spirits. Mauritanian Muslims, however, do not emphasize the Islamic concepts of the eternal soul and of reward or punishment in an afterlife.

### **Tenets of Islam**

The *shahadah* (profession of faith, or testimony) states succinctly the central belief, "There is no God but God (Allah), and Muhammad is his Prophet." The faithful repeat this simple profession on ritual occasions, and its recital designates the speaker as a Muslim. The God preached by Muhammad was known to his countrymen, for *Allah* is the general Arabic term for the supreme being rather than the name of a particular deity. Rather than introducing a new deity, Muhammad denied the existence of the pantheon of gods and spirits worshiped before his prophethood and declared the omnipotence of God, the unique creator. The term *Islam* means submission to God, and a person who submits is a Muslim.

Muhammad is the "Seal of the Prophets," the last of the prophetic line. His revelations are said to complete for all time the series of revelations that had been given earlier to Christians and Jews. God is believed to have remained one and the same throughout time, but men are seen as having misunderstood or strayed from his true teachings until set aright by Muhammad. Prophets and sages of the biblical tradition, such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, are recognized as inspired vehicles of God's will. Islam, however, reveres as sacred only the message, rejecting Christianity's deification of the messenger. It accepts the concepts of guardian angels, the Day of Judgment, resurrection, and the eternal life of the soul.

The duties of the Muslim form the "five pillars" of the faith: the *shahadah*, *salat* (daily prayer), *zakat* (almsgiving), *sawm* (fasting), and *hajj* (pilgrimage). The believer prays facing Mecca five times a day. Whenever possible, men pray in congregation at a mosque under direction of an imam (see Glossary), or prayer leader, and

*Old mosque at Nouakchott  
Courtesy Larry Barrie*



on Fridays are obliged to do so. Women are permitted to attend public worship at the mosque, where they are segregated from the men, but their attendance tends to be discouraged, and more frequently they pray in the seclusion of their homes.

In the early days of Islam, a tax for charitable purposes was imposed on personal property in proportion to the owner's wealth; the payment purified the remaining wealth and made it religiously legitimate. The collection of this tax and its distribution to the needy were originally functions of the state. With the decentralization of Muslim religious and political authority as Islam spread to many countries, however, this became an individual responsibility.

The ninth month of the Muslim calendar is Ramadan, celebrated as the time during which the Quran was revealed to Muhammad. It is a period during which Muslims must abstain from food, drinking, smoking, and sexual activity during the daylight hours. Exempted are the sick, soldiers on duty, travelers on necessary journeys, young children, and menstruating, pregnant, or lactating women. The well-to-do accomplish little work during this period, and many businesses close or operate on reduced schedules. Since the months of the lunar calendar revolve through the solar year, Ramadan occurs during various seasons.

Finally, at least once during their lifetime, all Muslims should if possible make the *hajj* to the holy city of Mecca to participate in the special rites that occur during the twelfth month of the lunar calendar. Upon completion of this and certain other ritual

assignments, the returning pilgrim is entitled to an honorific title, *Hajj* (fem., *Hajji*).

In addition to prescribing specific duties, Islam imposes a code of conduct entailing generosity, fairness, honesty, and respect for others. It proscribes adultery, gambling, usury, and the consumption of carrion, blood, pork, and alcohol. The proscription of alcohol is irregularly enforced in most Muslim countries, but since 1986 the Mauritanian government has strictly enforced its prohibition.

Muslims traditionally are subject to sharia, which—as interpreted by religious courts—covers most aspects of life. Sharia was developed by jurists from the Quran and from the traditions of the Prophet, and it provides a complete pattern for human conduct. Sharia also serves as a normative legal code (see Legal System, ch. 4).

### **Brotherhoods and Saints**

The religious movement known as Sufism arose in the thirteenth century in reaction to the orthodox emphasis on law and its denial of the mystical or emotional needs of the human spirit. Sufism stressed the intuitive and emotional discovery of Allah by the faithful, and it interpreted the Quran as providing a key to the mystical union or personal friendship of individuals with God. The mystical elements of Sufism also facilitated the blending of Islamic beliefs and pre-Islamic religious concepts. With the rise of Sufi concepts came acceptance of the role of “intercessors” between the individual and God, which led to the formation of brotherhoods (*tariqas*, or “ways”) and recognition of holy men (marabouts). From the thirteenth century, the brotherhoods and the marabouts were perhaps the most important elements in the growth and development of Islam in West Africa.

Essentially stemming from the combination of Sufi mysticism and orthodox Sunni intellectualism, the Islamic brotherhoods have also been important as a unifying cultural and religious force. Because membership in a brotherhood cut across ethnic and tribal lines, it contributed to the development of a broad communal identity.

The brotherhoods are all extremely hierarchical. Each has a chief who initiates all members and delegates certain responsibilities and authority to other leadership levels. Brotherhood members generally live in the secular communities of their tribes rather than in a central location, although they may live in separate communities while they are undergoing instruction. Thus, the religious community is more spiritual than physical for most brotherhood

members, even though there is a central territory (*zawiya*; pl., *zawaya*) for an order or for its important branches.

The leaders of the brotherhoods are believed to have *baraka*, a supernatural gift that has been defined variously as "blessing" or "mystical power." In a general sense, *baraka* is more than a spiritual force or power. It is a complex of positive personal traits—moral, intellectual, and emotional—with which only some men are endowed and which sets these men apart from others in their group. Originally it was believed that *baraka* was invested only in the descendants of Muhammad. With the rise of Sufism and the growth of the brotherhoods, however, it became a quality that could be transmitted to other religious leaders or to anyone judged particularly worthy.

In the 1980s, two brotherhoods, the Qadiriya and the Tijaniya, accounted for nearly all the brotherhood membership in Mauritania. The Qadiriya and Tijaniya were essentially parallel "ways," differing primarily in their methods of reciting the litanies. Their Islamic doctrines and their religious obligations were basically similar. Two smaller brotherhoods also existed—the Chadeliya, centered in Boumdeït in Tagant Region, and the Goudfiya, found in the regions of Tagant, Adrar, Hodh ech Chargui, and Hodh el Gharbi.

### *The Qadiriya*

The Qadiriya is the largest and most highly organized brotherhood in Mauritania. Founded in Mesopotamia in the twelfth century by Abd al Kadir ad Djili, it spread to Africa in the fifteenth century. Like all brotherhoods, the Qadiriya includes some emotional mystical elements, but it also stresses learning and Islamic education as the way to find God. All members of the Qadiriya are directed to follow the precepts of humility, generosity, and respect for their neighbors regardless of religious beliefs or social standing.

The Qadiriya brotherhood has had two main branches in Mauritania, the Sidiya and the Fadeliya. Although the Sidiya has been most influential in the vicinity of Trarza—where the family and followers of the brotherhood's founder, Shaykh Sidiya Baba, were centered—it has also been important in Brakna, Tagant, and Adrar. The Fadeliya, founded in the early nineteenth century by Mohammad Fadel, has been centered in Oualâta and Atar.

### *The Tijaniya*

Ahmed at Tijani, an Algerian Berber, founded the Tijaniya brotherhood in 1781. Its rituals tend to be simpler than those of

the Qadiriya, and its members are not expected to pursue Islamic learning to the same extent. Essentially a missionary order, the Tijaniya brotherhood has spread in many areas of West Africa at the expense of the Qadiriya. One explanation for its expansion may be that the simpler and more flexible Tijaniya teachings are better suited for modern life.

Tijaniya precepts include injunctions against lying, stealing, cheating, and killing. These precepts insist that promises and obligations be honored, neighbors be loved, and superiors be obeyed. Members are to deprive no one of his freedom without cause and are to reflect continually on God in prayer. Although the Tijaniya recognizes that everyone sins, it suggests that loyal members of the brotherhood will be rewarded in an afterlife.

The Tijaniya has two branches in Mauritania, the Hadeviste (or Hafediste) and the Omariya. Little is known about the Hadeviste. The Omariya branch was founded by a Toucouleur, El Hadj Omar, in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The membership of the Omariya is largely Toucouleur, but many Soninké, Fulbe, and Wolof also belong to this order. A subdivision of the Omariya, the Hamallya, was founded in the early twentieth century by Sherif Hamallah. The Hamallya emphasizes mystical Islamic beliefs more than most of the other brotherhoods and stresses the equality of all mankind. Drawn from the Fulbe and from mixed Maure groups, Hamallya membership initially included ex-slaves, young people, and women. This group has tended to be extremist, and the main Tijaniya brotherhood claims it is not a true Tijaniya group.

### *Marabouts*

The leader of a brotherhood, called shaykh by the Maures, is often referred to as a marabout. This term, however, is a general title that applies to any religious leader or to any person who performs the functions traditionally associated with Islam. In a religion without formal clergy, the marabout represents the human element in the faith, the intermediary between the people and Islamic theology. The marabout exercises a moral and spiritual influence within the culture and propagates the faith by teaching, proselytizing, and—at least in the past—wielding political influence. Marabouts usually are associated with a brotherhood and, like the leaders of the brotherhoods, are believed to possess *baraka*.

The functions of a marabout include teaching and promoting Islamic culture; leading religious recitations (including chants in some cases) in community prayer; and performing rites connected with curing the ill, preventing misfortune, and soothsaying. Because illness is believed to have spiritual as well as physiological

causes, the marabout is called upon to help cure the sick. The marabout also makes, uses, and sells amulets and talismans that are believed to have mystical powers to protect their bearer from sickness, injury, and other misfortune.

Other functions of the marabout include negotiation, mediation, and activities related to peacekeeping; the granting of protection and asylum to individuals; and the acting as advisers and agents of important tribal leaders. Although the role of the marabout as political adviser to warring tribes or groups has diminished, many of these mediation or arbitration tasks have political overtones.

## **Changing Social Patterns**

In the 1980s, Mauritanian society was a collection of distinct, stratified ethnic groups that showed little evidence of social cohesion or national identity. The process of creating national institutions or professional classes had hardly begun. For most Mauritians, loyalty to family, lineage, and ethnic group far outweighed allegiance to the state or to national institutions. Ethnicity, social position, and caste identity remained strong, conditioning the processes of state formation and administration.

During the colonial period, Mauritania's social structure had come to reflect the impact of French administrative preferences. Individuals, families, and dominant clans attempted to use the colonial presence to maintain or improve their privileged status. Among the Maures, for example, the *zawaya* tribes at first used their control of religious education to dominate economically and politically. This was accomplished at the expense of the *hassani*, who had made the transition from warriors, raiders, and tribute collectors to pastoralists, traders, and low-level civil servants. However, the French generally employed Wolof and Toucouleur, rather than Maures, as low-level civil servants. By 1960 black Africans were the majority of the colonial administration's civil servants and played a much larger role in the modern employment sector than did either the *hassani* or the *zawaya*.

After independence was granted in 1960, Mauritanian society changed faster than it had during the colonial period. This era saw the beginnings of urbanization, the founding of a permanent capital, the establishment of national organizations such as trade unions, and the expansion of education facilities and literacy. It also brought a reorientation away from West Africa toward the Maghrib (see Glossary) as the number of white Maures in the government increased. Secular education, heretofore largely the preserve of black Africans, increased significantly among Maures. White Maures attempted to give Mauritania a distinct Arab-Berber

character and in doing so often alienated the black population. At the same time, Maures developed a sense of ethnic identity and unity that had not existed before independence.

By the 1980s, the ranks of the bureaucracy and military included both white Maures and black Africans, but the distribution of professionals in these ranks varied widely (see *Impediments to Change*, ch. 4). In the late 1970s, studies indicated that black Africans generally formed a larger proportion of the salaried professional class than did white Maures, whereas the opposite was the case among wage earners and general laborers. Continuing the colonial pattern, the Toucouleur and the Wolof were well represented in higher and mid-level professional ranks, and the Soninké were beginning to penetrate the lower and mid-level ranks. White Maures and black Africans were almost equally represented at the highest bureaucratic levels.

Considerable tension existed between Maures and black Africans in the late 1980s. Many Maures still viewed black Africans as people who should be under Maure control, a perception especially evident among more traditional Maure tribes of the north. Many blacks, however, considered Maures (especially white Maures) to be ignorant, lazy, and inefficient. They also saw white Maures as slaveholders. Thus, they feared growing Maure political and social dominance.

These attitudes intensified during the 1980s. Despite official denials, many black Africans complained of widespread racial discrimination in political and economic areas. They pointed to the disproportionate number of Arab-Berbers at the top of the government bureaucracy and military command, to Mauritania's close ties with the Arab world, and to the emphasis on the use of Arabic in national life to support these complaints.

Another issue that exacerbated racial tensions during the 1980s was access to land along the Senegal River. As plans for economic development along the river valley progressed, blacks feared that wealthy white Maures would buy up productive land in areas traditionally claimed by blacks. Desertification of once-fertile lands farther north added to the competition for better watered land in southern Mauritania.

As in many newly independent countries with marked ethnic and linguistic diversity, the selection of national and official languages heightened intergroup tensions. At independence, Hassaniya Arabic was given "national" language status, while French remained an "official" language. In 1966, however, the government made Hassaniya Arabic an official language along with French and required that Arabic be taught in secondary schools, a requirement



*Peul market in Nouakchott  
Courtesy Larry Barrie*

that brought protests from Mauritania's blacks (see Public Order and Internal Security, ch. 5).

In the late 1980s, blacks continued to protest against the compulsory study of Arabic and complained that their lack of proficiency in the language was used to block their advancement in the bureaucracy and military. Blacks could still choose to be educated in French, however, and French retained its status as an official language. The government also permitted primary-level instruction in several of Mauritania's African languages.

Economic development has altered traditional social organization, particularly among groups near centers of modernization. Rapid urbanization has accelerated these changes. The importance of lineage endogamy has declined among Maures, and customary marriage patterns have begun to change. By the late 1980s, urban Mauritians paid less attention to distant segments of their lineages, and they seldom reckoned their kin-group membership back more than five generations.

Economic functions of the various black African and Maure caste groups were becoming less rigid; social patterns, therefore, also were becoming more fluid. An increasing number of Mauritians were involved in work unrelated to traditional caste occupations. Although the customary social distinctions associated with traditional stratification patterns remained and individuals were

still identified socially as members of particular castes, there were indications that caste designations were becoming less important socially and economically. In addition, government efforts to modernize and commercialize the activities of craftsmen and fishermen resulted in some rise in the social status of these groups.

If the pace of change was slow in Mauritanian society as a whole, it was even slower in the area of slavery. Slavery was abolished in 1960 and again in 1980. Mauritanian authorities acknowledged the continued existence of slavery and took limited steps to eradicate it, but in 1981 observers estimated that at least 100,000 people were still slaves and 300,000 were ex-slaves.

In 1974 a group of escaped slaves formed an emancipation movement known as El Hor (Freedom). By the late 1970s, El Hor began to achieve some notable successes; the 1980 decree abolishing slavery was owed at least in part to El Hor's agitation, as were fact-finding missions by the London Anti-Slavery Society (1981) and the UN (1984). Building on these achievements, El Hor continued to press for specific laws to ensure that emancipation became a reality and that former slaves enjoyed equal rights and treatment.

Factors that conditioned the role of women in Mauritanian society in the late 1980s included the impact of Islam and sharia (Islamic law); West African influences that allowed women substantial independence in some social and economic areas; economic modernization, which challenged customary behavior patterns in some areas; and Mauritania's rapid pace of urbanization, which subjected traditional nomadic customs to new scrutiny. Many women in such urban centers as Nouakchott, for example, were born in the rural interior of the country and found their childhood training challenged by changing urban social conditions.

Girls' education took place primarily at home and emphasized homemaking skills. Some girls attended Quranic schools, but their training was usually limited to learning verses from the Quran and attaining minimal literacy skills. A mother's responsibility toward her daughter traditionally included instruction in household and family affairs and childrearing. In recent decades, fathers were responsible for financing any formal education for their children, but a father's most important responsibility toward his daughters was to prepare them for marriage, primarily by ensuring their physical attractiveness. A widespread practice was forced feeding (*gavage*). Forced feeding usually involved psychological pressure, rather than physical force, but it often required a family to reserve substantial quantities of food—in most cases, milk—for consumption by its pre-teenage daughters, whose beauty was a measure of a father's

commitment to the marriage alliances they would form. Many young women were betrothed or married by the age of eight or ten. Unmarried teenage girls were subjected to severe social criticism.

Divorce was fairly common in Mauritanian society in the 1980s, even among very traditional villagers. A divorced man suffered no social stigma, but a divorced woman could still become an outcast if her family or her former husband's family criticized her behavior. Women traditionally had cared for their homes and worked in limited agricultural pursuits; but by the 1980s, they were beginning to enter professions formerly closed to them, such as commerce, teaching, and a variety of skilled occupations.

By 1985 nearly one-fourth of all girls below the age of eleven attended primary school, a marked increase over enrollment figures just a decade earlier. More women were attending secondary schools and university, and in the mid-1980s two women were appointed to cabinet-level posts (see *Women*, ch. 4).

## **Education**

In the late 1980s, Mauritania was still in the early stages of developing a modern education system. Although Islamic education had long been an important part of life, this religious instruction involved only rote learning of the Quran. Few Mauritians possessed skills necessary to create a modern nation-state.

The government has consistently stressed the need for improved and expanded education programs and in the 1980s was actively pursuing these goals. While modern, skill-oriented programs were being established to help satisfy the growing needs for skilled workers and technicians, efforts also were under way to expand traditional Islamic education. Expanding Quranic education has been viewed as necessary to preserve Islamic cultural tradition and promote national unity.

### **Traditional Islamic Education**

Mauritania has long had an extensive but scattered education system consisting of the religious and cultural education provided by marabouts. Indeed, it was largely through the efforts of these teachers that Islam was spread throughout West Africa. Although in the past Islamic education was largely limited to fundamental religious teaching, the children of white Maures often studied Arabic and simple arithmetic as well. Both boys and girls received traditional education, at first within the family and later in the local Quranic schools operated by the marabouts. They usually began

their education around the age of eight, the boys studying for about seven years, the girls for perhaps only two.

Traditional Islamic schools were found in the nomadic communities and in settled villages. Because particularly renowned marabout teachers would be surrounded by families who wished their children to learn from these masters, several centers of more advanced Islamic learning developed around the camps of these marabouts. In these centers, students learned grammar, logic, and other subjects, as well as traditional religious subjects. Many of the centers developed sizable collections of manuscripts through the efforts of the great marabouts.

The tradition of religious learning centers continued through the late colonial period. The Institute of Islamic Studies, founded in 1955 at Boutilimit, was the only Islamic institution of higher learning in West Africa. It provided instruction in traditional Islamic subjects and teaching methods. After independence, it was moved to Nouakchott, where it continued to draw upon the manuscript collection built by the marabouts of Boutilimit as well as other libraries of traditional Islamic literature in Chinguetti, Kaédi, Mederdra, Oualâta, and Tidjikdja.

### **Modern Education**

The French colonial administration established a system of public schools in Mauritania. The French schools were largely concentrated in the sedentary communities in the Senegal River Valley. In 1950 the first teacher training school was established at Boutilimit, and in 1957 the secondary school in Rosso also began training teachers. In part because public schools were concentrated in the south, black Africans enrolled in large numbers. As a result, the overwhelming majority of public school teachers were black, and blacks came to dominate the nation's secular intelligentsia.

The few French schools located in nomadic areas had difficulty attracting students. The Maures in particular were reluctant to accept the public schools and continued to favor purely Islamic instruction. Gradually, however, they began to send their children to public schools, as they saw that traditional religious training was not preparing their children for life in the twentieth century. The French also experimented with "mobile schools" after World War II, and in this way they provided public education for a larger number of nomads. In 1954 there were twelve so-called "tent" schools serving 241 students. At least some of these tent schools continued to function after independence.

The independent government viewed secular education as one of the major methods to promote national unity, as well as a



*Classroom in a Nouakchott school  
Courtesy United Nations (J. Laure)*

necessary step toward the development of a modern economy. It still faced shortages of funds, adequately trained teaching staff, and classroom facilities at all levels. Another teacher training school was opened in Nouakchott in 1964.

School attendance was not compulsory, and in 1964–65 only 19,100 primary-school students and 1,500 secondary-school students—about 14 percent of school-age children—were enrolled. By 1985 an estimated 35 percent of primary-school-age children were enrolled in school, but only about 4 to 10 percent of eligible secondary-school-age children were enrolled. In both cases, boys heavily outnumbered girls.

In 1985–86 primary-school enrollments had climbed to 140,871, and enrollments in secondary and vocational schools amounted to 34,674. The government reported a total of 878 primary schools and 44 secondary or vocational institutions. A total of 4,336 students were enrolled in postsecondary training programs. An additional 448 students were attending the National Islamic Institute (formerly the Institute of Islamic Studies), and some 1,900 Mauritians were enrolled in various training programs abroad. The public schools employed almost 2,900 primary teachers, 1,563 secondary and vocational teachers (412 of them foreign), and 237 postsecondary instructors, more than half of them expatriates. In 1982 the National College of Administration and the National College of

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Sciences opened in Nouakchott, and in 1983 nearly 1,000 students began instruction at the University of Nouakchott.

Illiteracy remained a major problem and an important impediment to economic and social development. In 1985 the adult literacy rate was estimated at 17 to 25 percent, approximately half the average for sub-Saharan Africa. Nonetheless, this rate represented an improvement over the estimated 5 percent literacy rate at independence and 10 percent a decade later. Recognizing the need for a better educated work force, in mid-1986 the government launched a major literacy campaign and created the State Secretariat of Culture, Information, and Telecommunications to head the effort. That same year, the government reported that the number of literacy classes had already increased more than ten times over the 1985 number.

At the same time, the cost of education was quite high in comparison with neighboring countries. In the mid-1980s, Mauritania was spending about US\$45 million (20 percent of current expenditures) on education every year. Its costs for primary schooling were the highest per student in francophone West Africa, and only Côte d'Ivoire exceeded the cost per secondary pupil. These high costs were due in part to teachers' salaries, particularly those of expatriates, and to a generous system of scholarships. Planned investment in education for the years 1985 through 1988 was set at US\$27 million under the Economic Recovery Program for 1985-88, an increase of less than 1 percent over the period from 1980 through 1984.

The French system of primary and secondary schools remained in force into the late 1980s. Over the years, however, some significant changes had been made, and others were planned. In the early 1980s, instruction in Pulaar, Azayr (Soninké), and Wolof was introduced into the primary school curriculum, and Arabic was emphasized at all levels. The official policy of gradually replacing French with local languages and Arabic, adopted in the late 1970s, drew vigorous protests from French-speaking black Mauritians and was abandoned within a decade.

Mauritania remained critically short of skilled labor. In the mid-1980s, only about 15 percent of secondary-school students were enrolled in vocational education. To redress this situation and to raise the general level of literacy, the government encouraged the growth of private and Quranic schools; most industrial training took place in private institutions. More important, the government also turned to the international community. In 1987 the World Bank agreed to help make Mauritania's education system more responsive to the country's development needs. Proposed changes involved

expanding primary education and restructuring secondary schooling. Special attention was to be given to vocational training in areas of particular national need, such as hydraulic engineering and fisheries.

## **Health and Welfare**

Despite the central government's good intentions and some health care planning, health care and medical facilities in Mauritania remained inadequate in the late 1980s. Most Mauritians, especially those who inhabited rural areas, did not have access to modern health care facilities. Nouakchott and the provincial centers had facilities, but even in these locales health care was rudimentary. Planned public investment in health and social services for the years 1985 through 1988 was projected at only US\$2.5 million. While this doubled the amount spent from 1980 through 1984, it was still inadequate to meet the country's needs.

## **Medical Care**

Mauritania's health care infrastructure in the early 1980s consisted of a central hospital in Nouakchott, twelve regional hospitals, a number of health clinics, maternal and child care centers, dispensaries, and mobile medical units to serve the countryside. All facilities suffered from a lack of equipment, supplies, and trained personnel. The ratio of people to hospital beds was 2,610 to one. The ratio of people to physicians was 13,350 to one. This ratio represented an improvement over the 1965 figure of 36,580 to one and was better than that of some of Mauritania's neighbors.

In 1987 Mauritania's largest medical facility was the 500-bed government-run hospital in Nouakchott. Staffed by Mauritanian and expatriate doctors, it lacked supplies and properly maintained equipment. Other facilities included the National Health Center, built in 1977 for the study of disease prevention and methods of public health care education, and the National School of Nurses and Midwives, founded in 1966 to train nurses, midwives, and paramedical personnel.

In general, health standards were quite low, and many infectious diseases were endemic. Contagious diseases (such as measles and tuberculosis) and respiratory disorders were more prevalent in northern arid regions, whereas malaria, guinea worm infection, and schistosomiasis were more common in the Senegal River Valley. The desert tended to be a healthier environment than the more tropical south, but several major diseases were common to all areas of the country. Typhoid, poliomyelitis, hepatitis, and a variety of parasitic illnesses also affected the population. In late 1987, the World Health Organization issued warnings about

cholera, and outbreaks of both yellow fever and Rift Valley fever were reported in the extreme southern part of Trarza Region around Rosso. Contagious and infectious diseases were rampant in the *kébés* surrounding major towns, cities, and villages.

In the mid-1980s, a mass vaccination campaign for children under five years of age was under way. The program, aimed at reducing infection from poliomyelitis, diphtheria, pertussis, and several other diseases, was reportedly meeting with some success. Malnutrition remained widespread, especially in children. The long-term drought and the consequent drop in food production exacerbated this problem during the early 1980s. According to a 1987 report by the United States Agency for International Development, between 40 percent and 70 percent of children under the age of five had experienced moderate to severe malnutrition. The degree of malnutrition varied according to the success or failure of local crops, and some slight improvement was noted in early 1987.

### **Housing**

The massive influx of nomads into towns and cities during the 1970s and 1980s created a severe housing shortage in southern Mauritania. *Kébés* quickly sprang up around Nouakchott and other cities and towns and along major roadways. These *kébés* continued to grow as drought emptied the countryside of most of its inhabitants. By the late 1980s, according to government estimates, roughly one-half of Nouakchott's total population lived in the shantytowns.

Many of these nomads continued to live in tents, each tent normally housing five or six people. Others constructed crude dwellings of wood and scrap metal. In the south, refugees more commonly built temporary houses of sun-dried brick. In virtually all locales, *kébé* dwellers and permanent city residents alike had little or no access to such basic urban amenities as drinkable water or sanitary waste disposal. To emphasize that it considered the *kébés* temporary, the government prohibited construction of permanent housing in shantytowns, hoping to induce refugees to return to their rural homelands. Expenditures on rural and urban water supplies were set at more than 14 percent of projected public investment for the years 1985 through 1988, or US\$10.4 million, an increase of almost 11 percent over the amount budgeted from 1980 through 1984.

Confronted with an urgent need for low-cost housing, the government created the Real Estate Construction and Management Corporation (Société de Construction et de Gestion Immobilière) in 1974. Relatively few housing units were built, however, and those proved too expensive for the intended occupants because of cost



*A woman tends a plot rented from  
the Women's Cooperative in Mbagne.  
Courtesy UNICEF (Maggie Murray-Lee)*

overruns and poor financial management. From 1977 to 1982, an experimental self-help housing scheme in the Sahara District of Rosso Region led to the construction of more than 500 housing units for 4,500 people. Employing local labor and materials and assisted by outside expertise and capital, the project succeeded until external financing and local initiative faltered. Additional international assistance was promised in 1985 when Kuwait and Saudi Arabia agreed to finance more than 1,000 low-cost dwellings.

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The best coverage of contemporary Mauritanian society is found in *Introduction à la Mauritanie*, published by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. The essays in this volume cover major aspects of Mauritanian society; particularly relevant is the essay by Francis de Chasse, "L'évolution des structures sociales en Mauritanie de la colonisation à nos Jours." Two other sources on social structure are Charles C. Stewart's "Political Authority and Social Stratification in Mauritania," which traces the continuity in social classes and political authority from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and Amadou Diallo's "Réflexions sur la question nationale en Mauritanie." Diallo covers much of the same

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ground as Stewart, but in addition he looks at the representation of different ethnic groups in the professions and state offices.

Richard V. Weekes's *Muslim Peoples* contains basic ethnographic information on Mauritania's major peoples. Otherwise, information on family structure and values and on Mauritanian Islam is generally lacking in current literature, although Barbara Abeille's study of women provides information on the role of women and the family. Sources on contemporary Mauritanian slavery are Roger Sawyer's *Slavery in the Twentieth Century*, John Mercer's "Slavery in Mauritania Today," and the 1984 report of the United Nations Economic and Social Council's Commission on Human Rights, *Slavery and Slavery-Like Practices*. These studies detail the conditions of slaves in mid-twentieth-century Mauritania and also provide prima facie evidence that the Mauritanian government has acknowledged the existence of slavery and attempted to ameliorate if not to abolish it.

A number of sources deal with the current cycle of drought affecting West Africa. Michael H. Glantz, in "Drought in Africa," discusses the fundamental factors behind recurrent African droughts. William S. Ellis and Steve McCurry assess the impact of the drought upon humans, animals, and land in the mid-1980s in text and photographs in "Africa's Sahel—The Stricken Land." (For further information and complete citations, see Bibliography.)

## Chapter 3. The Economy





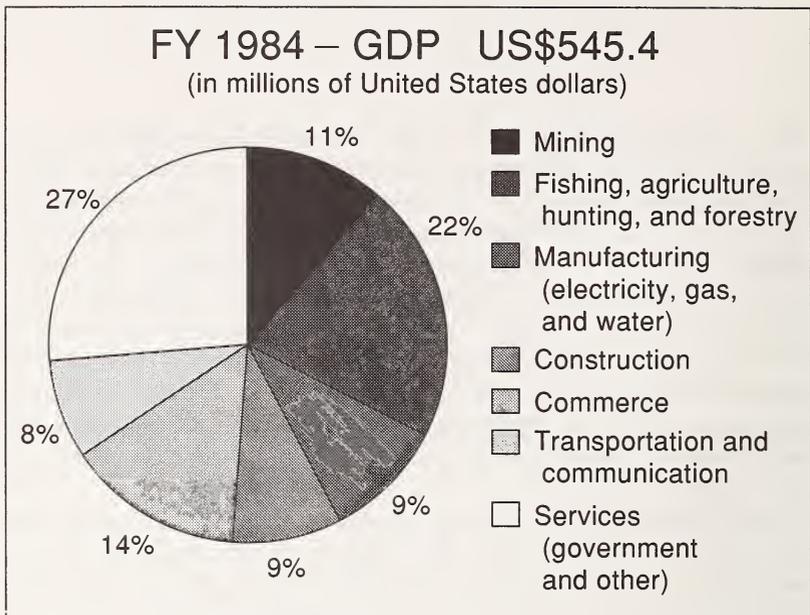
*Imraguen fisherman and his catch*

AT INDEPENDENCE IN 1960, Mauritania embarked on an ambitious but ill-conceived development plan to construct large-scale industrial projects in the mining, energy, and manufacturing sectors. The failure of many of these projects left the nation saddled with one of the largest foreign debt burdens in the world in proportion to the size of its economy. In the late 1980s, Mauritania's economy continued to rely heavily on the earnings derived from the export of iron ore and fish. The economy also remained seriously hampered by a structural inability to feed the country's population. Even in nondrought years, large amounts of food aid were needed to supplement domestic production and commercial food imports.

Until the mid-1980s, iron ore mining was the motor of economic development in Mauritania. Exploitation of rich, high-grade iron ore deposits began in 1963. In the 1960s, mining directly provided almost one-third of the gross domestic product (GDP—see Glossary) and contributed more than 80 percent of the country's export earnings. Mauritania also began mining copper deposits in 1973; the mine closed in 1975, however, because of falling world copper prices. The worldwide recession that caused a fall in demand for copper also affected iron exports. Iron mining stagnated during the later 1970s. By the mid-1980s, the mining sector had lost its predominance in the economy, accounting for between 10 and 11 percent of GDP in fiscal year (FY—see Glossary) 1984, and by 1985 export earnings from mining had fallen to around 40 percent (see fig. 5).

The waters off the coast of Mauritania are among the richest fishing grounds in the world. Before 1979, however, the government exercised little control over foreign fishing operations, and Mauritians took little part in fishing. Fishing and fish processing accounted for less than 5 percent of GDP in 1975, and virtually the only revenues obtained were in the form of royalties on fishing licenses paid by foreign fishing companies to the government. In 1979 Mauritania established its New Fisheries Policy and a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The industry underwent rapid growth under the new policy, which required foreign operators to form joint ventures with Mauritanian companies and resulted in the development of a national fishing fleet.

Although in 1984 fishing contributed less than 10 percent to GDP at current market prices, the volume of reported fish exports rose



Source: Based on information from David Hillings et al., *Africa South of the Sahara*, 16th ed., London, 1987, 680.

Figure 5. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by Sector, Fiscal Year (FY) 1984

rapidly. In 1983 fishing became the number one foreign exchange earner with some 54 percent of export revenues. Fishing, together with mining, employed about 9 percent of the economically active population.

Through the 1970s, agriculture, including herding, continued to deteriorate. Serious droughts combined with economic neglect to cause a severe decline in farm production. Both herding and agriculture were hard hit by the droughts: their combined contributions to GDP dropped from about 40 percent in the 1960s to about 25 percent in 1986.

In the early 1960s, Mauritania produced about half of its grain needs. After dropping to an all-time low of about 3 to 5 percent of its grain needs during the drought years of 1983-85, production rebounded somewhat to about one-third of need in 1986. Although the vast majority of the people remained attached to the traditional agro-pastoral life of the countryside, this life was becoming extremely difficult. Desertification advanced in some areas at a rate of six kilometers per year. Increasingly, refugees from the countryside began to migrate to urban centers such as

Nouakchott. With the exception of a few scattered oases, farming was limited to the narrow band along the Senegal River.

As recently as the mid-1970s, only 20 percent of Mauritania's total population were sedentary farmers. Between 1975 and 1980, their contribution to GDP averaged 3 to 5 percent. During the same period, the pastoral herding sector of the economy constituted about 20 percent of GDP and engaged 60 to 70 percent of the total population. Of the states in West Africa, Mauritania had the highest ratio of cattle to people, a ratio of three to one. The livestock-to-crop ratio of GDP also was the highest for West Africa, as animal husbandry contributed four times as much to GDP as did farming.

The cumulative effects of drought and weak demand for Mauritania's iron exports, along with the heavy expenses of the war in the Western Sahara (see Glossary) during the mid-1970s, curtailed the rapid growth of the 1960s that had been marked by an average rise in GDP of 8 percent a year. During the late 1970s and the 1980s, the economy stagnated, and financial instability supplanted an earlier ability to meet foreign debt obligations. From 1974 to 1984, GDP growth averaged 2.3 percent, barely keeping pace with population growth. In 1986 GDP per capita income was estimated at US\$410, no higher in real terms than a decade earlier, placing Mauritania at the lower end of low- to middle-income developing countries. Real per capita income for the vast majority of the population outside the small modern sector was much lower, estimated in the range of US\$100 to US\$150 per year.

## **Role of the Government**

Since independence in 1960, the government has played the central role in development planning and economic management. In 1963 the government inaugurated the first of a series of four- and five-year development plans. Covering the period 1963-67, the first plan had two primary goals: reducing Mauritania's dependence on external financing (principally French) and foreign personnel and laying the foundation for economic development through a series of basic studies of the country's resources. The plan gave investment priority to processing facilities in the mining industry (30 percent of total programmed financing), urban development (15 percent), and transportation and communications (12 percent). The plan neglected the rural sector, however; only 9 percent of programmed financing was earmarked for agriculture and livestock, and nearly all of it went for construction and maintenance of small dams and wells and for meat packing and storage plants. Virtually no money was allocated for improving agriculture and livestock production techniques. In 1963, in pursuit of the plan's first

objective, the government requested a halt to French subsidies to the current operating budget. Nevertheless, French development assistance continued and was critical to investment plans that favored the partly French-owned iron mines that opened in 1963.

In the second (1970-74) and third (1976-80) development plans, Mauritania asserted an independent national economic identity and established the framework of the public sector. In 1973 Mauritania withdrew from the French-backed West African Monetary Union (Union Monétaire Ouest Africaine—UMOA) and created an independent central bank and national currency, the ouguiya. In 1974 the government nationalized the mining sector, and enterprises engaged in basic public services and “mauritanized” staff positions throughout the newly expanded public sector. Planners continued to focus on investment in mining and infrastructure (roads in particular). Between 1970 and 1975, mining received 39 percent of a planned total expenditure of UM8.9 billion (for value of the ouguiya—see Glossary), and roads received 20 percent. The rural sector continued to lag, as the government allocated to it only 7 percent of total development spending.

The government that came to power in 1978 adopted a fourth five-year development plan (1981-85) and a stabilization program that had International Monetary Fund (IMF—see Glossary) support. The stabilization program called for tighter controls on government spending, more stringent tax collection, and major debt rescheduling. The five-year plan had three objectives: the development of irrigated agriculture, the rehabilitation of the iron mining sector, and the construction of a national fishing industry.

Public enterprises emerged rapidly during the 1970s and by 1985 totaled more than 100 entities. Through these parastatal enterprises, the government brought under national control the exploitation of the country's natural resources and the provision of basic public services—functions that were still largely in foreign hands as late as the mid-1970s. By the mid-1980s, public enterprises generated about 20 percent of GDP and employed some 14,000 people, thus providing about 25 percent of recorded employment in the modern sector. By 1986 the parastatal companies included twenty-five largely government-owned industrial and commercial enterprises, twenty-seven joint ventures with the private sector, and fifty-six decentralized services in administration, research, and education. The largest public enterprise was the National Mining and Industrial Company (Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière—SNIM).

The majority of the larger, wholly government-owned enterprises operated in principle on a commercial basis. Nevertheless, since

the late 1970s they have operated at a loss, and many have failed to provide the services for which they were responsible. Direct government operating subsidies to these public enterprises were modest, totaling only 3 percent of government expenditures in 1983. Their losses (in addition to undelivered services) reverted to the government, however, because they failed to pay tax liabilities and the government assumed their debts. In 1986 public enterprises owed 25 percent of Mauritania's total public external debt.

The poor performance of public enterprises had a variety of causes, including a paucity of technical and professional skills among increasingly "mauritanized" staffs, a poor definition of roles and responsibilities, inadequate pricing policies, weak accounting practices, and overstaffing. In 1983 the government launched a program to reform and rehabilitate the public sector, and this program continued under the 1985-88 Economic Recovery Program and the 1987 Structural Adjustment Program agreements with the World Bank (see Glossary). Under the original 1983 program, no new public enterprises were to be established unless they could be economically justified; public enterprises were to be reviewed and nominated for liquidation, privatization, or rehabilitation; subsidies were to be phased out; and pricing policies were to be revised to reflect economic costs. In addition, interlocking relationships between the central government and individual enterprises were to be more clearly defined and enterprise debt arrears settled; excess staff was to be trimmed, hiring of new unskilled staff was to be frozen, and a new salary scale was to be established. Finally, substantial improvements in budgeting, accounting, and auditing procedures were to be introduced.

By 1987 progress in achieving these goals was impressive. The government had implemented selective rehabilitation of five large public enterprises. It also had privatized three others and begun liquidating five more.

The government's plan included privatizing three of the country's eight public financial institutions. In 1984 it settled interlocking debts of fifteen important enterprises through compensation, cancellation, and refinancing. In 1985, under new pricing policies, regulated producer prices paid to farmers by the Commission for Food Security (Commissariat à la Sécurité Alimentaire—CSA) rose by 40 percent. At the same time, the CSA raised the price of subsidized food aid on sale by 50 percent. The National Import-Export Company (Société Nationale d'Importation et d'Exportation—SONIMEX) raised consumer prices for food and basic commodity goods by approximately 30 percent to reflect real costs and to achieve full import parity on grain prices at the Senegalese border. Water

and electricity prices rose by 10 percent, and port services fees rose by 25 percent, in part to compensate for the 1985 currency devaluation (see *Government Finances*, this ch.). The government reduced labor costs at SNIM, where it cut the work force by 25 percent. By the end of 1987, public sector management, wage policies, training, accounting procedures, and policies governing relations between the public enterprises and the central government all were under intensive review by the World Bank and the international donor community.

## **Fishing**

The waters off the 754-kilometer-long coast of Mauritania are among the richest fishing grounds in the world (see fig. 6). In 1986 estimates of the country's potential annual marine resources ranged between 400,000 and 700,000 tons. Mauritanian officials estimated the potential annual catch at 525,000 tons, a level close to that of Senegal, which had the largest fishing industry in West Africa. The actual catch, however, could only be estimated on the basis of export figures from Mauritania, recorded catches of licensed operators, and estimates of unrecorded and unlicensed catches. Unrecorded and unlicensed fishing in Mauritania's waters were believed to be high, perhaps in excess of 100,000 tons annually. In 1983 recorded exports and declared licensed fishing catches were estimated at 450,000 tons. Combining these figures, experts believed Mauritania's waters were close to being overfished. Although these waters had long been commercially exploited by foreign fleets, Mauritians historically had done little fishing. The majority Maure population consumed little fish, and only the small Imraguen ethnic group fished for subsistence (see *Maures*, ch. 2).

Until 1979, Mauritania's efforts to exploit the economic benefits of its fishing grounds focused on licensing foreign operators in territorial waters (confined until 1980 to a thirty-nautical-mile limit). These efforts, coupled with some port and processing development designed to attract fleets to land their catches at Nouadhibou, were only partially successful. The principal benefit came in the form of licensing royalties, calculated on the basis of 10 percent of an operator's reported catch. Because Mauritania had no means of patrolling its waters, many foreign operators were never licensed, and licensed operators consistently underreported their catches. Nevertheless, revenues from fishing royalties were very important to the government and in 1977-78 accounted for almost 20 percent of total budget receipts. In addition, the port and processing facilities were underused. In 1967 only 35 percent of the 52,000-ton annual processing capacity was used. Foreign operators preferred

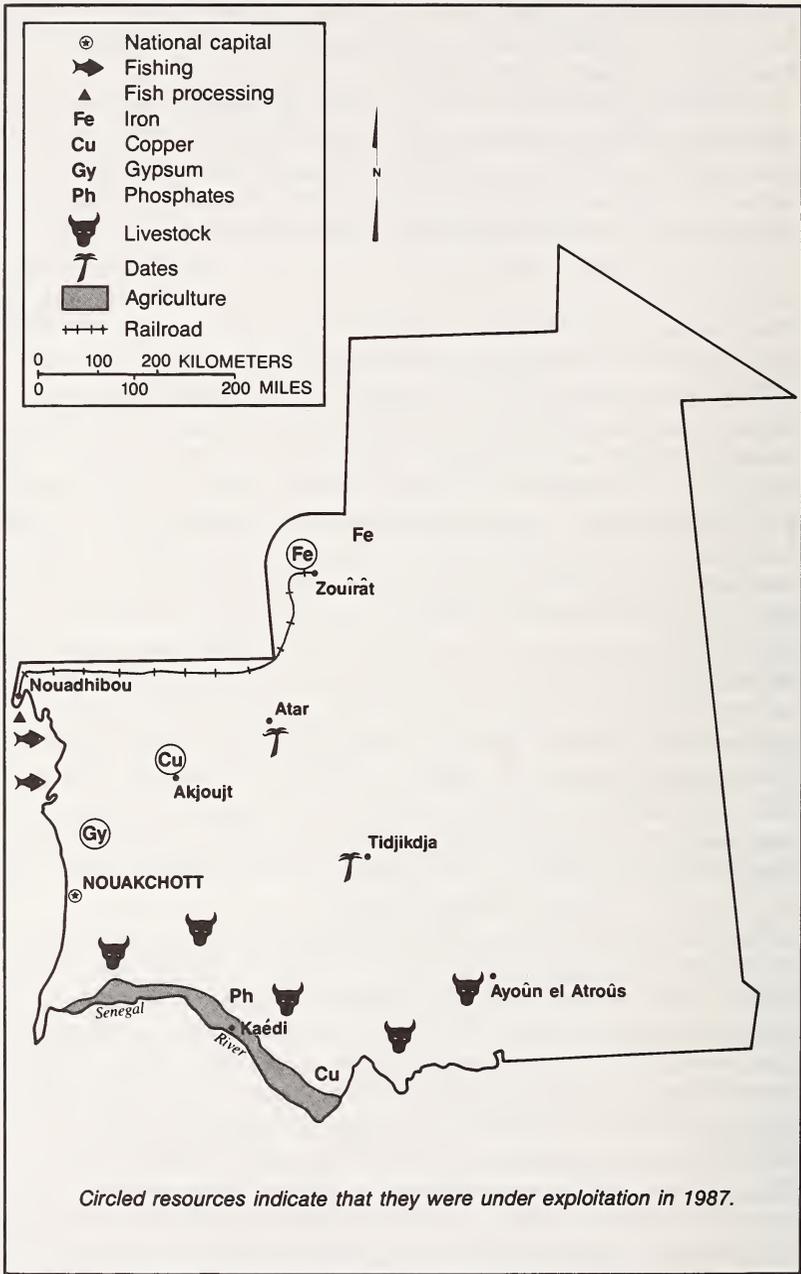
to use the facilities at Las Palmas, in Spain's Canary Islands, where they could avoid the supply, handling, water, and electric power shortages prevalent at Nouadhibou.

In 1979 Mauritania initiated its New Fisheries Policy and established a 200-nautical-mile EEZ. The New Fisheries Policy had three objectives: the formation of Mauritanian-controlled joint ventures, the creation of a national fishing fleet, and the establishment of a Mauritanian-controlled fish processing industry at Nouadhibou.

The first of these objectives led to the replacement of licensing and royalties agreements with foreign operators by newly formed Mauritanian-controlled joint ventures. In principle, such joint ventures implied a 43 percent government share, an 8 percent local private sector share, and a 49 percent foreign share. In practice, Mauritanian control of these ventures was nominal. The foreign partner provided all the capital and equipment and controlled all operations. Government and private shares were to be purchased out of venture profits over periods as long as twenty years. By 1986 the most important of the joint venture agreements that had been established was the Mauritanian-Soviet Maritime Resources Company (Mauritanienne-Soviétique des Ressources Maritimes—MAUSOV). Between 1985 and 1987, MAUSOV accounted for about 55 percent of total export tonnage and 20 to 30 percent of the total value of fish exports. The next most important joint venture was the Mauritanian-Romanian Fishing Company (Société Mauritano-Roumaine de Pêche—SIMAR). Between 1985 and 1987, SIMAR accounted for 16 to 18 percent of total export tonnage and 7 to 10 percent of the total value of fish exports. Other significant joint ventures were established with Algeria, Iraq, and the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

The development of a national fishing fleet and processing industry led to the creation in the early 1980s of two public enterprises. The government also participated in and lent support to several privately owned Mauritanian fishing and processing companies. The most important of these was the Mauritanian Commercial Fish Company (Société Mauritanienne de Commercialisation du Poisson—SMCP). Owning no boats or facilities, the SMCP was a marketing board that bought all fish landed at Nouadhibou. By the terms of their agreements, joint ventures were required to land a portion of their catches—in practice, only the more valuable demersal (sea-bottom) fish—for local processing. The SMCP arranged processing and cold storage at port facilities before resale and export. Between 1985 and 1987, the SMCP exported 14 to 17 percent of the total catch and accounted for 71 to 82 percent of the demersal catch, which translated into 75 to

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*Figure 6. Economic Activity, 1987*

88 percent of the value of demersal exports and 43 to 60 percent of the value of total fish exports. Another public enterprise, the Mauritanian Refrigeration Company (*Société des Frigorifiques Mauritaniens—SOFRIMA*), operated processing facilities as well as a fleet of fishing boats. Several small privately owned Mauritanian companies also operated facilities or fleets of fishing boats.

Between 1968 and 1974, processing capacity at Nouadhibou rose by 22 percent per year until it reached an annual capacity of around 140,000 tons. Between 1970 and 1979, however, companies landed between 50,000 and 80,000 tons of fish annually for processing at Nouadhibou—far below the port's capacity. During the first years of the New Fisheries Policy (1979 to 1982), tonnage landed dropped to under 10,000 tons. Once joint venture agreements were signed, however, average annual tonnage landed began to rise, reaching about 58,500 tons annually between 1984 and 1986. Joint venture companies built additional processing capacity, and by 1985 the port had an annual processing capacity of some 200,000 tons. Despite government policy requiring certain landings, however, at the rates companies were landing their catches, only 30 percent of the port's capacity was in use.

Because of poor services and high costs, Nouadhibou was unattractive to fishing fleets. Its principal problem was lack of handling equipment for quickly unloading frozen or iced fish from vessels to cold storage. In addition, fish spoiled quickly in the desert heat, and the high cost of electrical power for processing and cold storage (three times the cost at Las Palmas) made landing of any but the most valuable fish varieties uneconomical. In addition, supplies and equipment were not readily available. Many items had to be brought in on an emergency basis by air, further inflating the cost of operations. Local banking facilities were limited, and international communications were difficult and often unavailable. Finally, Nouadhibou—with only two small hotels and scant recreational opportunities—offered little attraction to crews of vessels calling at the port. For the most part, crews who used the port either stayed on ship, went directly to chartered flights home, or took commercial flights to recreational ports such as Las Palmas or Dakar. Thus, the local economy benefited little from their presence.

Compounding these problems, the types of fishing vessels in use and the economics of the international market in fish varieties also made Nouadhibou unattractive for fish processing. The most economical types of vessels in use in the mid-1980s were large trawlers capable of freezing, processing, and transshipping catches independently of any port. The largest were Atlantic- and Super Atlantic-class factory trawlers, built for the most part in the German

Democratic Republic (East Germany) and operated by the Soviets and Romanians. In the mid-1980s, these ships accounted for the bulk of Mauritania's reported catch, including 85 percent of pelagic (open-sea) fish. Between 1985 and 1987, pelagic fish represented about 79 percent of the total catch. The pelagic catch included sardines, herring, tuna, and anchovies. Although it represented the bulk of tonnage caught, the pelagic catch included the least valuable of fish varieties in Mauritania's waters and was fished almost entirely by the Soviet and Romanian joint ventures. From 1985 to 1987, MAUSOV and SIMAR accounted for 90 percent of the pelagic catch. Because of their size and draft, the Atlantic- and Super Atlantic-class pelagic freezer-factory trawlers could not enter Nouadhibou, and they transshipped their catches to refrigerated carrier vessels anchored outside the port.

The most valuable varieties of seafood in Mauritania's waters were demersals, including cod, sole, octopus, squid, lobster, and shrimp. For these varieties, joint ventures and local operators used demersal freezers and demersal ice boats. The ice boats had to unload their catches for processing at port before export, but the freezers were somewhat less dependent on port processing. In 1983 the government began requiring the landing and processing of all demersal catches at Nouadhibou under the SMCP monopoly. Between 1985 and 1987, the demersal catch was estimated at about 21 percent of the total catch, with the SMCP accounting for 71 to 81 percent of the demersal exports, representing as much as 60 percent of the total value of fish exports in those years.

Despite difficulties, the New Fisheries Policy was partially successful. Its adoption led to the formation of important joint venture operations and the growth of locally owned fishing fleets. Efforts to encourage local fishing brought some opportunity for sales to processors and exporters, estimated at 10,000 tons per year. In the 1983-85 period, 70 percent of the total estimated catch in Mauritanian waters was brought in by joint ventures and ships flying the Mauritanian flag. This activity generated approximately US\$150 million in gross export receipts and made fishing the country's most important source of foreign exchange. The remaining 30 percent of the reported catch continued to be fished by companies under older licensing agreements. These older agreements were due to expire by 1988 and included, in particular, operations of the Spanish and Portuguese fleets. A comprehensive fishing agreement covering the operations of these and other European operators that mainly fished for demersals was under negotiation with the European Community (EC) in 1987. To better control the estimated 100,000 tons of fish taken by unlicensed trawlers, the government, the World



*Imraguen fishermen*  
Courtesy UNICEF (Maggie Murray-Lee)

Bank, and the donor community were considering measures to increase surveillance and reporting. In late 1987, studies sponsored by the World Bank and donor community were under way to determine ways to increase the value-added portion of the industry to GDP.

## **Mining**

Mauritania's mineral wealth has been exploited since Neolithic times. Archeological evidence of a copper mining and refining site near Akjoujt in west-central Mauritania dates from 500 to 1000 B.C. Modern exploitation of copper at Akjoujt and the more important iron ore deposits between Fdèrik and Zouïrât began after independence.

## **Iron**

Plans to exploit the high-grade iron ore deposits at Kedia, near Zouïrât, began in 1952 with the formation of the privately owned Mauritanian Iron Mines Company (*Société Anonyme des Mines de Fer de Mauritanie—MIFERMA*). With support from the World Bank, the French government, and the Mauritanian government, MIFERMA (owned by French, British, Italian, and West German steel interests) began operations in 1963. By 1966 MIFERMA had invested the equivalent of some US\$200 million in mining facilities at Kedia, port facilities at Nouadhibou, and a rail line to carry the ore to port for export.

Iron mining quickly dominated Mauritania's economy. In 1966, after only three years of operations, iron mining contributed 28 percent to GDP and accounted for 92 percent of the value of all exports. The three surface mines at Kedia had a rich ore content of 65 percent. Mined by explosives from the sides of tall rock formations, the ore was loaded on 100-ton trucks for transport to the railhead. There, the ore was also crushed and sorted. The ore was then loaded on the world's heaviest trains (200 cars carrying a total of 20,000 tons, pulled by four locomotives, and averaging two kilometers in length) for transport to Nouadhibou for export (see *Transportation and Communications*, this ch.). Normally, there was one trip daily in each direction along the 650-kilometer line.

Iron mining provided the income for Mauritania's economic development during the first two decades of independence. Construction of the mine, rail, and port facilities provided wages to thousands of laborers. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the industry employed some 6,000 workers and accounted for about 10 percent of the jobs in the modern sector. Development of the mines and their associated infrastructure took the bulk of investment

funds allocated under the first three national development plans (see *Role of the Government*, this ch.). The iron mining industry had a substantial direct and indirect impact on the economy, and many industrial and construction enterprises worked primarily or exclusively for the iron company. By the mid-1970s, iron operations consumed about 40 percent of the country's imports of fuel oil. At the same time, mining was responsible indirectly for about 25 percent of GDP because of its high consumption of public utilities (power and water), commerce, transportation, and services. Iron also provided nearly 30 percent of all government revenues, thereby making an important contribution to all public sector investment and current expenditures. By the early 1970s, the cumulative effects of the growth of iron mining on national accounts, along with rising demand and good world commodity prices, enabled Mauritania to be recategorized by the World Bank and United Nations (UN) from a "least developed country" to a "moderate-income developing country." This reclassification increased Mauritania's ability to borrow on the international market to finance its ambitious development plans.

The development of the iron mines also contributed directly to the country's rapid urbanization. At independence, the populations of Nouadhibou and Zouïrât were estimated at less than 5,000 each. By the mid-1970s, these two towns had more than quadrupled in size to around 20,000 to 30,000 people each. Mining revenues to the government also helped spur the growth of the administrative capital at Nouakchott, which grew from around 5,000 people in 1960 to over 125,000 people in the mid-1970s.

In 1974 Mauritania nationalized the mining industry as a part of its effort to establish economic independence under the second development plan. With substantial assistance from Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Mauritania bought out the European owners of MIFERMA. Transfer of ownership to the newly formed SNIM was smooth; the terms of the transfer kept the foreign expert personnel and managers on the job and maintained the commercial relationship with the former owners of MIFERMA.

The mid-1970s marked a turning point for Mauritania's economy. Two events adversely affected the mining sector. The first was the onset of the world recession in 1974 and 1975, caused by the sharp rise of world oil prices; the second was Mauritania's costly involvement in the Western Sahara conflict between 1976 and 1978. These events, along with a prolonged drought that began in the late 1960s, reversed Mauritania's iron-based economic growth.





*Open pit iron ore mine near Zouirat  
Courtesy Embassy of Mauritania, Washington*

From the beginning of mining operations in 1963, Mauritania's production and export of iron ore rose constantly for a decade. In 1974 ore exports reached their all-time high of 11.7 million tons (see fig. 7). In the following year, with falling demand for steel in Western Europe, Mauritania's exports of iron ore declined by more than 25 percent, to 8.7 million tons. Between 1975 and 1987, iron ore exports averaged 8.5 million tons annually. Between 1976 and 1978, attacks on the rail line by the Polisario (see Glossary) exacerbated the situation. In 1978 ore exports had fallen to 6.2 million tons. Mauritania's withdrawal from the war in mid-1978 allowed some recovery but did not affect the trend resulting from continued weak demand for iron ore on world markets.

By the late 1970s, the worsening economic situation created the first in a series of financial crises for the state, whose revenues fell with declining iron ore exports. This decline affected the government's ability to meet increasing foreign debt obligations. An immediate result of this financial crisis was the government's decision to reorganize the nationalized mining sector as a part of an IMF-supported stabilization program. Following nationalization in 1974, SNIM controlled not only iron mining but also copper and gypsum mining, as well as other industries and trading activities related to mining. The most important benefits of this arrangement for SNIM were control over the national distribution of petroleum products through the Petroleum Products Commercial Union (Union Commerciale des Produits Pétroliers—UCPP); control of the explosives industry (with factories in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott); and participation in the Arab Metal Industries Company (Société Arabe des Industries Metallurgiques—SAMIA), which planned and later operated a steel rolling mill at Nouadhibou. Until 1978 SNIM's operations were the direct responsibility of the president of the republic and were administered by a board of supervisors composed of twelve members from the various ministries under the chairmanship of the minister of planning and mines.

The reorganization carried out between 1978 and 1979 led to SNIM's divestiture of many of these operations, particularly those related to copper and gypsum mining and petroleum products distribution. The financial reorganization of SNIM resulted in the sale of about 30 percent of the company's shares to new foreign investors, including the Arab Mining Company, the Islamic Development Bank, the government of Morocco, the government of Iraq, and the Kuwait Foreign Trading, Contracting, and Investment Company.

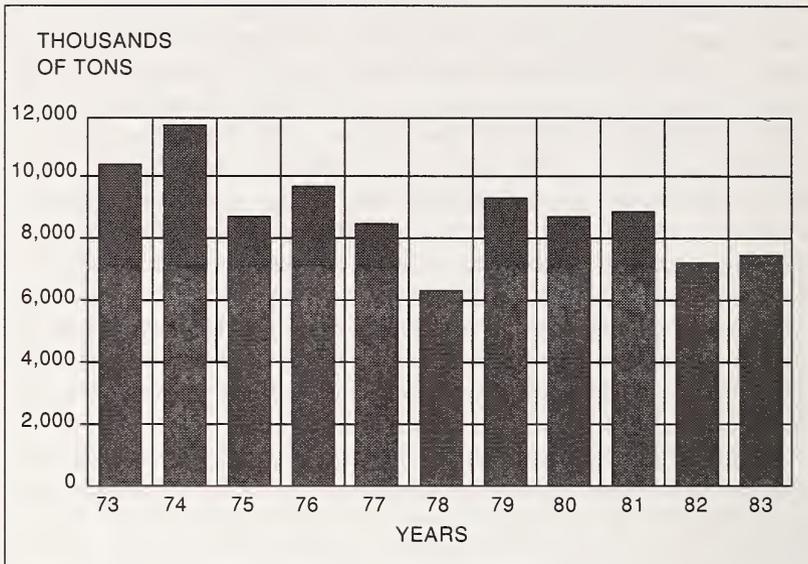
The critical importance of iron ore mining to the economy was underscored in the late 1970s by the ripple effects its decline had

on the country's ability to meet its debt obligations. Prospects that the industry would continue to decline throughout the 1980s as the older Kedia deposits were exhausted led the government, with World Bank support, to embark on the US\$500 million Guelbs Iron Ore Project in 1979. The sale of US\$120 million worth of SNIM shares to Arab investors was one means of raising the capital for this massive project. Further support was guaranteed by large loans from the World Bank, the Saudi Fund, France's Central Fund for Economic Cooperation (Caisse Centrale de Coopération Economique—CCCE), the Kuwait Fund, the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, the Abu Dhabi Fund, and the European Investment Bank. Smaller loans were secured from the Japan Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund, the African Development Bank, and the OPEC Special Fund.

In late 1984, the first phase of the Guelbs project went into operation with the opening of new surface mines at El Rheins, located in the Zouîrât district, about twenty-two kilometers from the Kedia deposits. Because the ore from the new deposits was not as rich as the Kedia ore (38 percent pure iron content as compared with Kedia ore's 65 percent iron content), the project required the construction of concentration and beneficiation facilities to raise the ore content to competitive marketing levels before export. Transportation, water, power, housing, and port facilities were also upgraded at Zouîrât and Nouadhibou to handle what was expected to be increasing ore exports. By 1987, however, world demand for iron ore had not risen as expected, and the 1986 opening of new Brazilian mines increased overproduction worldwide. The Guelbs project was not expected to be cost effective for some time, if ever. Plans for a second-phase expansion were postponed in 1987; the Kedia deposits were still in operation in late 1987 and were expected to continue production into the 1990s.

Since 1975 the decline of the iron mining industry, as represented by its direct contribution to GDP, has been constant. During the 1960s, mining directly accounted for no less than 25 percent and as much as 33 percent of GDP at current market prices. If indirect contributions to related industries are factored in, these proportions rise. By the mid-1970s, with its direct contribution to GDP around 20 percent, mining's total contribution to GDP was still above 30 percent. After 1976 mining's direct contribution to GDP fell, so that between 1980 and 1985 it averaged 10 percent; by 1987 it was only 8.6 percent.

Iron ore was the nation's most important source of foreign exchange for twenty years; the value of iron ore exports relative to other exports fell below 50 percent for the first time in 1983. In



*Figure 7. Iron Ore Exports, 1973-83*

that year, exports of fish overtook iron ore exports as Mauritania's most important foreign exchange earner. In 1985 iron ore represented 40 percent of total export earnings, down from an average of 80 percent between 1963 and 1980.

Despite these relative declines, iron mining remained a key factor in the overall economy. In terms of relative export percentages, mining's decline had little effect on day-to-day operations. In the 1984-86 period, levels of tons of iron ore shipped from Nouadhibou were actually higher than in the 1982-83 period. In 1985 SNIM was the country's largest employer after the government and accounted for over 40 percent of the jobs in public sector enterprises. In the 1970s, iron ore contributions to government revenues were estimated at around 30 percent of all government revenues. This percentage probably declined during the 1980s, but in late 1987 statistics were unavailable. Between 1981 and 1986, mining royalties contributed about 5 percent to government tax revenues. The industry's actual contributions were much higher, however, when taxes paid on business profits and wages and salaries, employers' payroll taxes, turnover taxes, export taxes, and nontax revenues from public enterprises are taken into account.

## **Copper, Gypsum, Phosphates, and Oil**

In 1967 the Mauritanian government formed a joint venture company with French and other interests to create the Mining Company of Mauritania (*Société des Mines de Mauritanie—SOMINA*). SOMINA was created to exploit copper deposits at Akjoujt. Operations began in 1973 but closed in 1975 because of the combination of high operating costs (particularly for fuel) and falling world commodity prices for SOMINA's low-grade ore. In 1975 the company was sold to SNIM. SNIM reopened the mine and continued to operate it at a loss until 1978, when the government separated SOMINA from SNIM and closed the mine. In the early 1980s, plans were laid to reopen the mines with backing from the Jordan-based Arab Mining Company of Inchiri (*Société Arabe des Mines de l'Inchiri—SAMIN*). By 1987, however, SAMIN had abandoned plans to operate the copper mine because of continued low world commodity prices and the high costs of processing the low-grade ore with its high arsenic content. In a related development, SAMIN planned to open a plant at Akjoujt to process copper tailings for gold content. Operations were scheduled to begin in 1988.

In 1973 SNIM began exploitation of large deposits of gypsum located about fifty kilometers northeast of Nouakchott. Total reserves of 98 percent pure gypsum were estimated at 1 billion tons. SNIM's operations during the 1970s entailed the export by road of roughly 17,000 tons per year to cement factories in Senegal. Senegal in turn sold cement to Mauritania on a rebate basis. Rising transportation costs forced a halt to operations in 1981. In 1984 production of gypsum resumed under the newly created SAMIA. SNIM held equal shares in SAMIA with the Kuwait Foreign Trading, Contracting, and Investment Company. Output in 1985 was 5,470 tons, which were consumed locally in a crushing and bagging operation that imported clinker from Senegal to make cement. Plans in 1987 called for resuming exports of gypsum to Senegal by sea once the new Chinese-built Friendship Port at Nouakchott became operational (see *Transportation and Communications*, this ch.).

In 1984 a consortium discovered large deposits of phosphates near the Senegalese border. Nonetheless, by 1987 no plans existed to exploit these deposits (estimated at 95 million tons of rock, averaging approximately 20 percent of phosphate pentoxide). The high cost of building the infrastructure and facilities needed to exploit the deposits, estimated in 1984 at US\$400 million, made exploitation unlikely for the foreseeable future.

In 1985 seismic surveys conducted jointly by Occidental Petroleum Company of the United States, the Chinese Petroleum Corporation

of Taiwan, and Yukong Limited of South Korea indicated a high possibility of petroleum and natural gas reserves in Mauritanian waters. In 1987 the American Oil Company (Amoco) signed an agreement with the government for a production-sharing contract to conduct offshore explorations in a 920,000-hectare tract west of Nouakchott. The company began seismic acquisition work in late 1987 and planned to drill exploratory wells in 1988.

## **The Rural Economy**

Located in the Sahelian and Saharan zones, Mauritania has one of the poorest agricultural bases in West Africa. Most important to the rural economy has been the livestock subsector. Between 1975 and 1980, herding engaged up to 70 percent of the population, and sedentary farmers constituted about 20 percent of the population. The vast majority of the population lived in the southern one-third of the country, where rainfall levels were high enough to sustain cattle herding. Farming was restricted to the narrow band along the Senegal River where rainfall of up to 600 millimeters per year and annual river flooding sustained crop production as well as large cattle herds. In the dry northern two-thirds of the country, herding was limited to widely scattered pastoral groups that raised camels, sheep, and goats, and farming was restricted to date palms and minuscule plots around oases.

A major reason for Mauritania's economic stagnation since the mid-1970s has been the decline of its rural sector. Government planners neglected both herding and farming until the 1980s, concentrating instead on development in the industrial sector. The rural sector was severely affected by droughts from 1968 through 1973 and from 1983 through 1985, and it has suffered from sporadic dry spells in other years. In the 1960s, livestock and crop production together provided 35 to 45 percent of GDP (at constant 1982 prices). From 1970 to 1986, their contribution to GDP (at constant 1982 prices) averaged 28 percent, with herding accounting for about 20 percent of this figure and with crop production falling to as low as 3 to 5 percent in the worst drought years.

### **Herding**

Historically, cattle herding was Mauritania's most important economic activity. In the 1980s, with a cattle-to-people ratio of three to one—the highest in West Africa—herding provided subsistence for up to 70 percent of the country's people. Herding has been dramatically affected by chronic drought and the attendant rapid advance of the desert. These events have forced shifts in patterns



*Ore-loading facility near Zouïrât  
Courtesy Embassy of Mauritania, Washington*

of movement, herd composition and ownership, and increased pressures on lands also occupied by sedentary farmers in the south.

Although sources disagree about herd size, it is clear that numbers have fallen since the 1960s (see table 2, Appendix). The decline in herd size probably did not reflect a wide scale dying-off of animals so much as an increasingly permanent shift of herds to better watered lands in Senegal and Mali.

The drought also caused shifts in the herding of camels (traditionally located in the drier north) and of sheep and goats (held by groups all across Mauritania). These changes were less dramatic than those for cattle, however, because camels, sheep, and goats are more resistant to drought. Although decreases in sheep, goat, and camel herd size in drought years could be significant, recovery was more rapid and sustained. In the years following the 1968-73 drought, camel, sheep, and goat herd sizes increased to predrought levels or higher. The same pattern seemed evident during the 1983-85 drought and the recovery years of the late 1980s. Indeed, the overall size of camel, sheep, and goat herds may have risen since the 1960s, as these hardier animals have moved into areas abandoned by cattle herds. This pattern seems to have been particularly true for the camel herds.

In the 1960s, cattle herds in Mauritania were composed of two basic types: the lighter, short-horned zebu, or "maure," which

made up perhaps 85 percent of the national herd; and the heavier, long-horned zebu, or "peul." The smaller zebu ranged farther north and were owned by nomadic herders. The larger zebu stayed closer to the better watered riverine areas and were owned by sedentary groups who practiced agriculture in addition to livestock raising.

Although traditional herding patterns persist, considerable changes have taken place. Since the 1968-73 drought, precipitation has been below average. Between 1973 and 1984, as the 150-millimeter isohyet line moved south, livestock often were forced to stay year-round in dry season grazing areas nearer the Senegal River and across the border in Senegal and Mali (see Major Geographic and Climatic Zones, ch. 2). Thus, the herd populations were compressed into a smaller area, increasing pressure on land resources and heightening competition among herding groups and between herders and sedentary farmers. Overgrazing in increasingly crowded areas and the cutting of trees and shrubs for firewood and fodder (particularly for sheep and goats) contributed to accelerating desertification and posed a threat to crop production.

Patterns of herd ownership also changed with drought and the impoverishment of the rural sector. Increasingly, herds belonged to urban investors (mostly government officials and traders) and were cared for by hired personnel (drawn from the pool of destitute pastoralists who, having lost herds, migrated to urban areas). Herders began to take advantage of access to public wells to graze herds in areas traditionally controlled by tribal groups. The extent of this growing system of "absentee herding" was difficult to assess; but by the mid-1980s, as much as 40 percent of the national herd was thought to be involved.

The Ministry of Rural Development was responsible for livestock and natural resource conservation. The ministry's National Livestock Department (Direction Nationale d'Élevage—DNE) was responsible for field services and for the annual rinderpest vaccination campaign. Headquartered in Nouakchott, in the mid-1980s the DNE operated eleven field centers in regional capitals and nineteen veterinary field stations, mostly located in the southern third of the country. Used principally in the annual vaccination campaigns, these field stations offered few other veterinary and extension services. The ministry also operated the National School for Training and Rural Extension (Ecole Nationale de Formation et Vulgarisation Rurale—ENFVR) at Kaédi, which since 1968 has trained veterinary field staff.

In 1981 the government established an autonomous state marketing enterprise, the Mauritanian Livestock Marketing Company

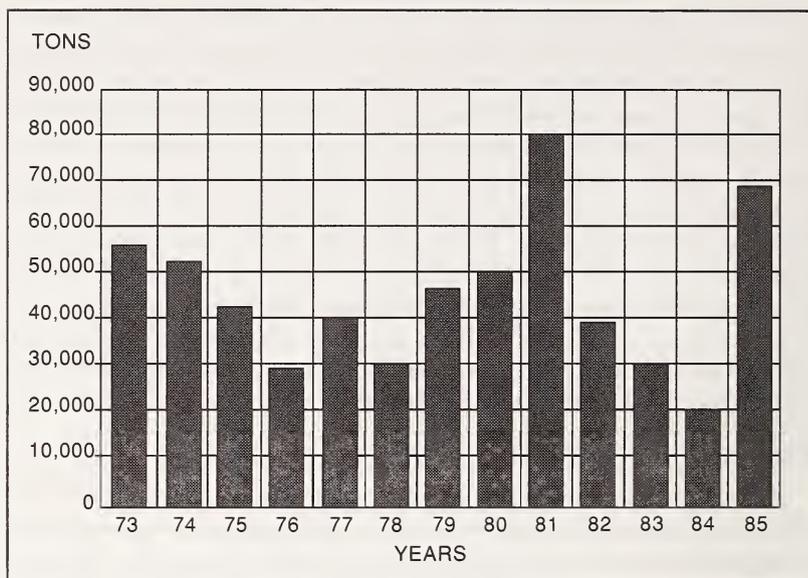
(Société Mauritanienne de la Commercialisation du Bétail—SOME COB). This agency had an official, but unenforceable, monopoly over livestock exports and the authority to intervene in market operations to stabilize domestic livestock prices. SOME COB was also responsible for the Kaédi Abattoir, constructed in 1975 as an export slaughterhouse. By 1986 it functioned for local municipal consumption only, far below capacity, and SOME COB's exports were negligible. Private exports of live cattle took place without obstruction from SOME COB. This trade consisted mostly of unrecorded movements into Senegal, Mali, and countries farther south. In the mid-1980s, the most important market for Mauritanian cattle was domestic, centered on Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, and the mining centers.

### Farming

Although it is a large country, most of Mauritania is desert. In the late 1980s, arable land was scarce, and, except for some oases, crop production was limited to a narrow band along the southern borders with Senegal and Mali. Farmers practiced four types of agriculture: rain-fed dryland cropping, called *dieri*; flood recession cropping along the Senegal River and its seasonal tributaries, called *oualo*; oasis cultivation, the least important; and modern irrigated agriculture.

The most important methods, *dieri* and *oualo*, were entirely dependent on limited and erratic rainfall and on the annual flooding of the Senegal River and its only perennial tributary in Mauritania, the Gorgol River. *Dieri* cultivation occurred during the rainy season, from June–July to September–October, in areas receiving sufficient precipitation (400 to 450 millimeters annually) to grow millet and peas. *Oualo* plantings occurred during the cold dry season from November to March, to take advantage of ground moisture as the flood waters of the Senegal and Gorgol rivers receded. Sorghum was the major crop for this season. Oasis cultivation drew its water from subterranean sources and so was not dependent on rains. Indeed, areas where oases were located might not experience any significant rainfall for years. Modern irrigated agriculture was only partially dependent on annual rainfall. It depended primarily on dams to retain water from the annual rise on the rivers resulting from rains falling upriver. For the Senegal River, these rains fell principally in the headwaters in eastern Mali and Guinea.

The two major droughts of the African Sahel were prolonged in Mauritania by intermittent dry spells. The result was a serious decline in overall agricultural production. In the 1960s, Mauritania



*Figure 8. Grain Production, 1973-85*

produced about one-half of its grain needs. By the 1983-85 period, grain harvests had fallen to a level that met only about 3 to 8 percent of the country's grain needs. The cereal deficits have been filled through a combination of commercial imports and international food aid, of which the United States has been the principal donor. During the most serious drought years, from 1983 to 1985, food aid accounted for over 61 percent of Mauritania's available supply of grain, commercial imports of rice by the government covered approximately 20 percent, and imports of flour by private traders provided another 13 percent. Local production was able to cover only 5 percent of need. In the following three years, local production recovered sufficiently to meet about one-third of the annual grain need, estimated in 1986 at 260,000 tons. In that year, local production covered 35 percent of need, government imports supplied 30 percent, and food aid met 35 percent.

Although accurate data were lacking, production of all grains in the recovery years from 1985 to 1987 rose to between 68,000 and 120,000 tons, a large increase over the record low of approximately 20,000 tons in 1984 (see fig. 8). Thus, gross production between 1985 and 1987 attained levels not matched since the mid-1960s. Rising population in the interim meant that, despite

this significant recovery, the country remained dependent on imported grains to satisfy its needs.

### *Crops*

Millet and sorghum were Mauritania's principal crops, followed by rice and corn. Before the 1980s, millet and sorghum accounted for 70 to 80 percent or more of total grain production. Rice production in the 1970s averaged 5 to 10 percent, and corn made up 10 to 25 percent. In the 1980s, rice production grew in importance, as national planning emphasized irrigated agriculture (which favored rice) and a change in dietary habits.

A few other crops were cultivated. Around 10,000 to 15,000 tons of dates were produced annually in the country's oases, mostly for local consumption. During the 1960s, the traditional production of gum arabic (see Glossary) rose to some 5,000 tons a year. By the 1980s, however, production of gum arabic had disappeared. The ill-considered cutting of trees to increase short-term production combined with drought to destroy virtually all of Mauritania's gum-producing acacia trees.

By 1986 farmers working irrigated lands produced about 35 percent of the country's grain crops. Of a potentially irrigable area estimated at 135,000 hectares, only some 13,700 hectares were in production in 1985-86. Most of the irrigated land (about 65 percent) was in large-scale developments (500 hectares or more) centered in Bogue and Kaédi, which were controlled by the government through the National Corporation for Rural Development (*Société Nationale pour le Développement Rural—SONADER*). The remainder were small-scale operations (less than fifty hectares), developed by a newly active private sector centered mainly in Rosso.

In the 1980s, the government put increased emphasis on developing the rural sector. Government planning strategy under the 1985-88 Economic Recovery Program placed the highest priority on rural development (35 percent of planned investments). Particular attention was to be paid to upgrading existing land and developing new irrigated farming and flood recession agriculture. There were also plans involving Mauritania, Mali, and Senegal to integrate rural development and water and flood control through the Senegal River Development Office (*Organisation pour la Mise en Valeur du Fleuve Sénégal—OMVS*) as the massive Diama and Manantali dams became fully operational (see *Relations with Other African States*, ch. 4).

### *State Control Mechanisms*

In 1986 the government agencies involved in agricultural production, marketing, and food distribution were SONADER, CSA, and

SONIMEX. Created in 1975, SONADER was a public agency under the control of the Ministry of Rural Development. Its general responsibilities focused on planning rural agricultural programs, including building and operating irrigation projects, training farmers in new techniques required for improved irrigation cropping, and providing credit and such inputs as fertilizers and pumping equipment. Organized in 1982 from two other agencies, CSA became responsible for stabilizing grain prices, maintaining a security food stock through market intervention, monitoring production and food deficits, and distributing food aid. SONIMEX began operations in 1966 as a government-controlled joint venture. The company held a monopoly on the imports of basic commodities (principally rice, tea, sugar, and tomato paste), which it resold to private interests for the retail trade. The private sector's role in cereal imports was legally restricted to wheat and flour. Numerous private traders in the marketing chain, however, were not covered (or were covered only partially) by CSA and SONIMEX. There were no precise data on the extent of domestic production marketed by private traders compared with CSA or on the extent of the grain trade across the Senegal River that was outside the control of SONIMEX.

### *Land Tenure*

The system of land tenure was in transition in the 1980s. Factors contributing to this transition included government abolition of centuries-old slavery practices involving tribal and ethnic relations between various herding and sedentary communities; government development policies, particularly with regard to land reform and large-scale irrigation schemes; and tremendous shifts in land settlement and herding patterns because of drought (see *Changing Social Patterns*, ch. 2).

Historically, landownership and range management were based on tribal relations and ethnic settlement patterns. Rangeland for herding was controlled through tribal ownership of wells; around oases, slave groups worked cultivable plots, although traditional noble clans held ownership of the land. In more southerly settled agricultural areas, ownership varied from region to region and village to village, depending on ethnic settlement patterns. Landownership might be vested in the clan or village chief as representative of the group and land distributed in perpetuity to family units having usufruct. Elsewhere, traditional nobilities might hold ownership of lands worked by formerly enslaved groups, who held traditional usufruct. Although a village chief could not sell land belonging to the clan (which would alienate family groups from the land),



*Irrigation dam at Fom Glaeta  
Courtesy United Nations (John Isaac)*

traditional noble clans could more easily sell property and effectively displace or disinherit slave groups. By the late 1980s, it was not known to what extent the formal abolition of slavery had affected traditional land relationships among noble and former slave groups. Also unknown was the impact of the government's stated policy of giving priority to former slave groups when lands that might be claimed under eminent domain were redistributed. Of potentially far greater importance in land tenancy was the 1983 Land Reform Act (see *Political Power in the Mid-1980s*, ch. 4). The underlying first cause of the act was the state's inherent and overriding interest in land development. According to the act, the government could grant title for parcels of undeveloped land—which apparently included fallow land—to whoever pledged to improve it and at the same time possessed requisite resources. Although the economic necessity of the act was beyond question, the social costs of appropriating valuable Senegal River Basin land hypothetically controlled by blacks and redistributing it to wealthy Maures from farther north could prove unacceptable. It was evident, however, that the situation was in considerable flux.

Large-scale government irrigation projects and plans for integrated development based on regional water management created another set of variables for traditional patterns of land use and ownership. Groups located in areas behind dams or in areas to be

either permanently flooded or deprived of annual floods with increased control over flow levels in the Senegal River were undergoing a process of controlled resettlement. The formation of cooperative production groups that were to be settled on the land—often on a first-come, first-served basis—was essential to project implementation.

## **Manufacturing and Industry**

The bulk of Mauritania's industry was in mining or mining-related activities. Industry, including fish processing but excluding mining, contributed only 5.3 percent to GDP in 1984. Industrial development was hampered by a limited infrastructure, a small local market with limited purchasing power, and a lack of skilled labor. In the mid-1980s, the labor force engaged in industrial activities numbered about 16,000 to 18,000 workers, of which 10,000 were employed in construction and an additional 4,000 to 6,000 were employed by SNIM. Most construction was related to the activities of foreign-financed projects, including mining. Some workers were employed in road and port construction. Within the small manufacturing sector were two main industries: an oil refinery and a steel mill. The rest consisted of small enterprises such as cement bagging, a perfume manufacturing facility, a blanket fabrication facility, and an American-built sugar mill in Nouakchott that had never used its refining capacity and was limited to packaging imported refined sugar. In 1986 about thirty small enterprises were in operation.

Built in 1976 with West German, World Bank, and government financing, the steel rolling mill had an annual production capacity of 36,000 tons of reinforcing bars and rods. Operated originally by SNIM, the mill, which was located at Nouadhibou, operated intermittently and unsuccessfully before it was closed and sold in 1984 to the Arab Iron and Steel Company (*Société Arabe du Fer et de l'Acier*—SAFA). Reopened in 1985, the mill continued to be plagued by technical and economic problems; output in 1986 was only 5,300 tons.

## **Energy**

Mauritania was completely dependent on petroleum imports for its commercial and electrical generating needs. That dependence increased in the later 1980s as overexploitation of the country's meager supply of woodlands led to further use of petroleum products to meet domestic energy needs. In the early 1980s, firewood provided one-half of gross domestic energy supply and, with charcoal, over 90 percent of residential energy needs. Annual firewood

consumption was eight times greater than the natural growth rate of the accessible forests. Between 1975 and 1985, overexploitation combined with drought damage and almost-nonexistent reforestation programs to reduce forest areas by 30 percent overall. In some areas, forests were reduced by as much as 50 percent. As a result of this declining firewood production and the total dependence of the modern sector on petroleum-based energy, the share of imported petroleum products in domestic consumption increased from 33 percent in 1975 to 55 percent in 1983.

By 1983 petroleum products provided over one-half of all energy supplies. Because of its use in electrical power generation, mining, and transportation, diesel fuel was the most important type of petroleum product, accounting for 75 percent of consumption. It was followed in importance by gasoline (16 percent), jet and aviation fuels (7 percent), butane (1.3 percent), and kerosene (0.7 percent). Consumption of butane grew rapidly in 1982 and 1983 in response to shortages of firewood for cooking in urban areas. In the mid-1980s, Nouakchott and southern Mauritania accounted for about 55 percent of total consumption of petroleum products, with Nouadhibou and Zouïrât accounting for virtually all the rest. In 1983 mining (plus the tiny manufacturing sector) consumed 42 percent of all petroleum products; transport, including fisheries, consumed 32.5 percent; electricity generation, 20 percent; government and commerce, 3 percent; residential use, 2 percent; and agriculture, less than 0.5 percent.

By the mid-1980s, Mauritania's installed electrical generating capacity was 162 megawatts. The National Electricity and Water Company (Société Nationale d'Eau et d'Electricité—SONELEC) accounted for only about 25 percent of that capacity, and only half of SONELEC's generating capacity was considered reliable. Nouakchott and Nouadhibou consumed 90 percent of SONELEC's generated power. SNIM generated all its own electrical needs for mining and for supply operations at Nouadhibou. The plant that supplied power to the Guelbs mine and ore beneficiation facility (56 megawatts) increased the nation's total generating capacity by about 35 percent. Other self-producers included an unknown number of small industrial, commercial, and residential establishments that proliferated as supplies from SONELEC became less reliable.

As a result of the serious technical, financial, and managerial problems faced by SONELEC, the company underwent a rehabilitation program under the 1985–88 Economic Recovery Program. The program included the construction of a new, cost-saving power plant in Nouakchott that was scheduled to begin operations in 1990. By 1987 SONELEC's implementation of the program included

improving bill collection, cutting labor costs by a 10 percent personnel reduction, and increasing prices by up to 30 percent.

In 1978 Mauritania completed construction of a US\$140 million oil refinery at Nouadhibou. The refinery operated only briefly in 1982 and 1983 because of cost factors, shortages of crude oil, and technical difficulties. Between 1984 and 1987, the refinery underwent an Algerian-financed US\$30 million rehabilitation to allow the processing of light Algerian crude. The project also included a butane bottling facility and a desalinization plant. The refinery reopened in early 1987 with a production capacity of 1 million tons per year. Refinery officials signed a five-year contract with Algeria's state-owned oil company to manage and market its products. A joint venture that included Mauritania, certain private interests, and the Algerian company was formed to bottle and market butane domestically. The butane plant, located in Nouakchott, started operations in 1987 with an annual capacity of 5,000 tons. Because of the high cost of Mauritanian-produced butane, the plant imported butane from Senegal for its operations.

## **Transportation and Communications**

The developed transportation network centered on the mining and fishing industries. The country's only railroad, a 650-kilometer-long line, connected the Zoufât mines with Nouadhibou (see fig. 9). Both the railroad and the ore port were operated by SNIM. The port had the capacity to handle bulk ore carriers of up to 150,000 tons, and the railroad carried some of the world's longest and heaviest trains (see Mining, this ch.). Nouadhibou was the country's only natural deep-water port and, in addition to the ore port, contained a separate commercial and fishing port. The fishing port was upgraded in 1983 under a US\$8 million World Bank loan.

In late 1986, the US\$150 million Friendship Port at Nouakchott was officially opened. Financed and built by China, the 500,000-ton-per-year deep-water port was an engineering feat, as the Chinese laborers had to contend with strong Atlantic currents and waves up to six meters high. The port was expected to eliminate the need to divert 35 to 40 percent of Nouakchott's traffic through Dakar, Senegal, and to reduce the high percentage of goods lost during transshipment from ships at anchorage. Despite the official opening, by late 1987 the new port was not yet in service because it still lacked certain facilities and equipment.

In the late 1980s, Mauritania's total road network was estimated at 9,000 kilometers. Only 1,500 kilometers of roadway were paved; the roadway consisted mainly of two trunk roads. The remaining roads were little more than tracks on the sand. Road construction

had been a high priority for Mauritania's planners in the 1970s. The chief project at that time was the US\$300 million, 1,000-kilometer Nouakchott-Néma Road (also called the Trans-Mauritanian Highway), financed largely through loans from Arab members of OPEC. But because the road was constructed through the desert north of the populated agricultural region along the Senegal River, additional major funding was later needed to link the southern towns of Bogué and Kaédi to the capital via this largely unused trunk road. Moreover, projected recurrent costs for maintenance of the Nouakchott-Néma Road were well above the government's foreseeable budgetary means. Mauritania's other major surfaced road connected the capital to Akjoujt and Rosso.

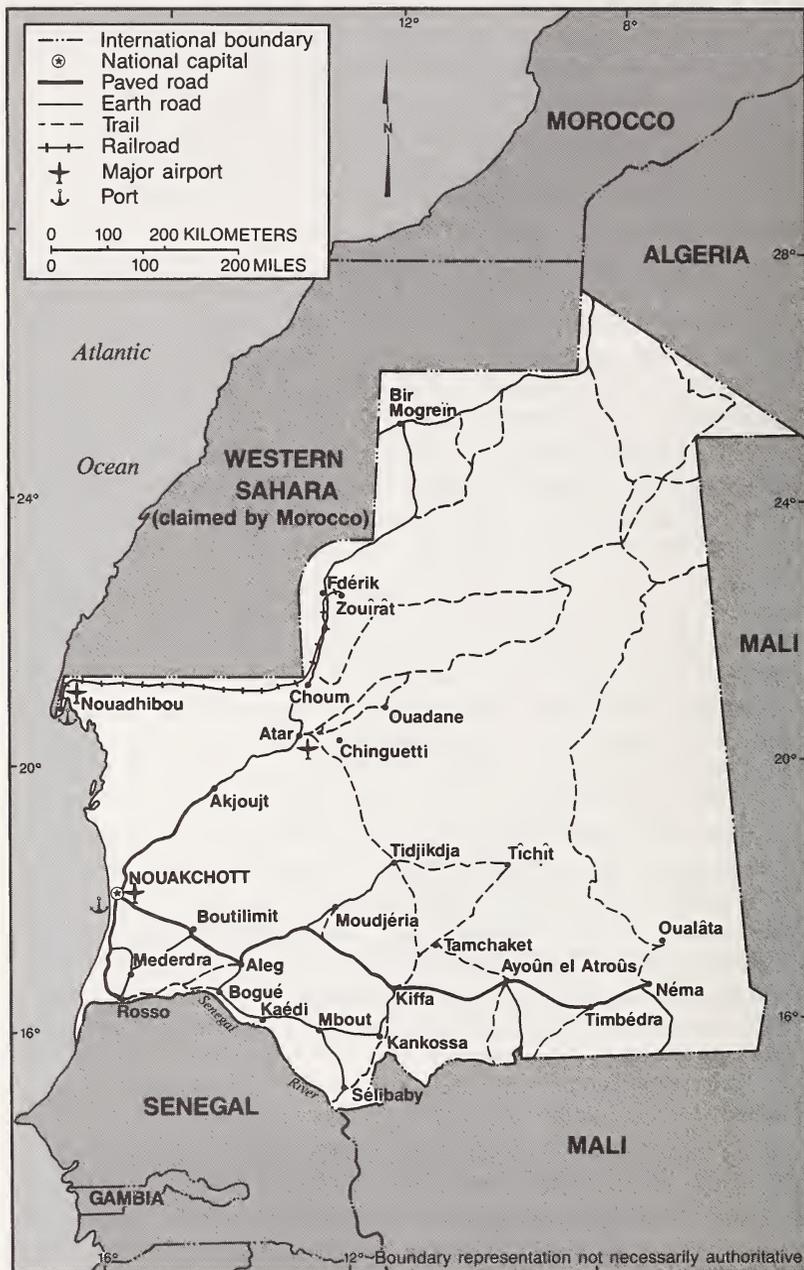
Airports at Nouakchott and Nouadhibou were capable of handling commercial jet aircraft. In 1986 the French were conducting studies to expand the airport at Nouakchott to handle Boeing 747s and comparable aircraft, and the European Development Fund was financing an automatic communications center at the airport. In the mid-1980s, the capital was served by Air Afrique, Iberia, Royal Air Maroc, and Union des Transports Aériens (UTA), including twice-weekly direct flights to Paris and six weekly flights to Dakar, where links were available for direct flights to New York three times a week. Internal flights were available between the capital and Nouadhibou and some thirty smaller airports. The national airline, Air Mauritanie, operated two eighty-seat Fokker F-28 passenger airliners for domestic flights and for flights to Dakar and Las Palmas.

In 1985 radiotelephone and wireless telegraph services linked Nouakchott to Paris, to most regional capitals, and to other towns in Mauritania. In 1986 the government began operating earth satellite stations in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. The system linked Mauritania to the International Telecommunications Satellite Organization (INTELSAT) network and the Arab Satellite Telecommunications Organization (ARABSAT) network. It provided ninety telephone or telegraph circuits and a link for television reception and transmission.

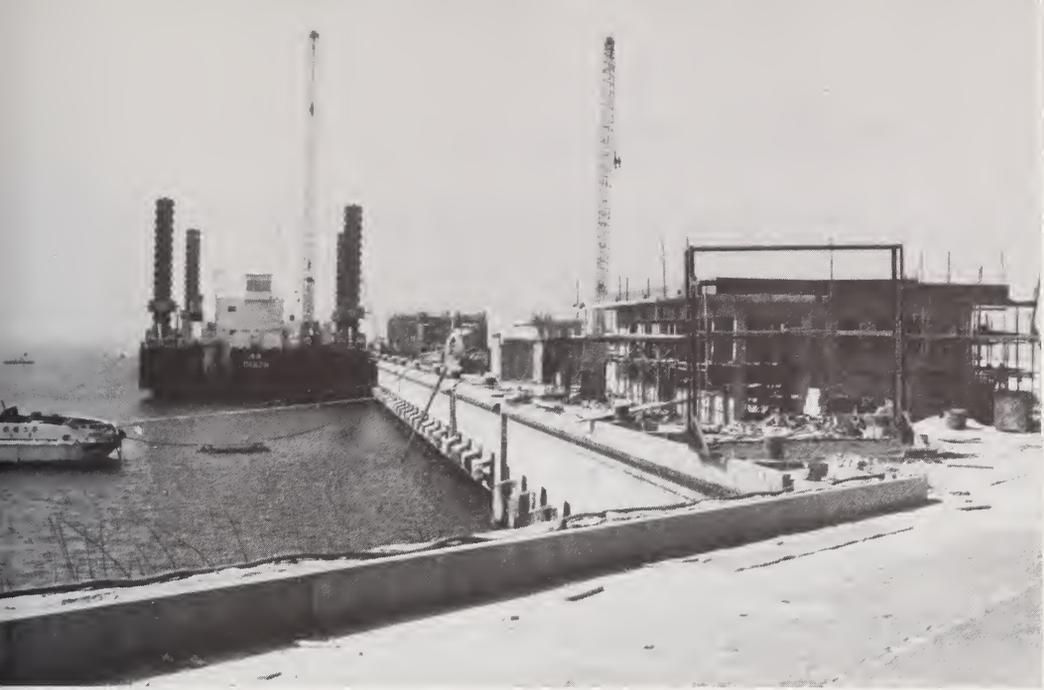
## **Trade**

Located between the rich civilizations of Sudanic Black Africa and Arab North Africa, Mauritania was historically a crossroads for trade. In modern times, the trans-Saharan trade—based on the exchange of gold, slaves, and salt—was superseded by trade with Senegal, Mali, and France. Mauritania's chief export during colonial times was gum arabic. Since independence, however, there has been a radical shift toward the export of mineral raw materials and the import of food, petroleum, and manufactured goods.

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*Figure 9. Transportation System, 1987*



*Nouakchott's Friendship Port built by China  
Courtesy Embassy of Mauritania, Washington*

## **Exports**

Since independence, Mauritania's main exports have been iron ore and fish. Between 1963 and 1980, iron ore exports were clearly most important, averaging 80 percent of the value of total exports. By the mid-1980s, however, fish exports had outstripped iron ore exports. Between 1980 and 1986, the value of fish exports rose to 59 percent of total exports; in 1983 fishing replaced iron ore as the major foreign exchange earner. During the same period, iron ore exports fell to around 40 percent of total exports. This circumstance did not reflect a significant decline in iron ore production, but rather a change in the way fish catches were recorded.

## **Imports**

The structure of Mauritania's imports since independence has reflected the country's growing dependence on foreign food, merchandise, and energy products. As domestic production of grains fell because of neglect and drought, the nation's reliance on commercially imported food grew. Between 1973 and 1986, commercial imports of grains and other foodstuffs, such as sugar and tea, averaged about 31 percent of all domestically financed imports. Ironically, in the periods of the worst drought, commercial food imports fell as Mauritania received free food assistance from the United States and Western Europe.

Other important domestically financed imports included petroleum products, construction materials, and transportation equipment. The values of these items and their percentage of total imports varied greatly from year to year, depending on such factors as development project requirements and military-related needs. A significant portion of imports were financed by foreign sources, often as components of development schemes or as emergency aid in times of drought. Between 1973 and 1986, imports directly financed abroad averaged over 20 percent of total imports.

### **Direction of Trade**

At independence, Mauritania traded mostly with its African neighbors. In 1961 almost 75 percent of the country's exports—then primarily livestock—went to Senegal and Mali. Imports of modern consumer goods came principally from France, moving through the ports of Senegal before transshipment to Mauritania.

With the emergence of the iron industry and of large-scale development projects in Mauritania, this picture changed. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and France imported most of Mauritania's iron ore. By the 1980s, as fishing exports increased, Western Europe became less important as a market for Mauritania's exports. Among industrial countries, which in 1986 took around 90 percent of the country's recorded exports, Japan received 28 percent, Italy 24.6 percent, Belgium 15.8 percent, and France 14.7 percent. The rise in Japan's portion of Mauritania's exports reflected both a diversification in iron ore customers and Japan's appetite for fish.

Since independence, France has remained Mauritania's most important supplier. In 1964 France provided 54 percent of the country's imports. That percentage dropped to 39 percent in 1969 and to 22 percent in 1981 but rose again to about 30 percent in 1985. Between 1981 and 1985, Spain, West Germany, and the United States also were important suppliers. Developing countries provided between 23 and 27 percent of Mauritania's imports between 1981 and 1985, of which African countries supplied as much as 15 percent.

### **Banking and Government Finances**

At independence, Mauritania became a member of the West African Monetary Union (Union Monétaire Ouest Africaine—UMOA) but withdrew in 1973 to demonstrate its independent economic identity. When it withdrew, the government also relinquished membership in the African Financial Community (Communauté



*Senegal River ferry at Rosso  
Courtesy Larry Barrie  
Loading iron ore at Nouadhibou  
Courtesy Embassy of Mauritania, Washington*

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Financière Africaine—CFA), whose currency—the CFA franc—was freely convertible to French francs. Mauritania then created its own currency, the ouguiya, and an independent central bank.

### **Banking**

In the mid-1980s, Mauritania's monetary and banking structure consisted of the Central Bank of Mauritania (Banque Centrale de Mauritanie—BCM) and six commercial banks established with the participation of the government or of the BCM. Other major shareholders comprised various Arab interests, which included Saudi and Libyan participation.

By the early 1980s, Mauritania's banking sector was deteriorating, chiefly because of an accumulation of nonperforming loans that constituted some 50 percent of commercial bank assets. Between 1981 and 1983, government borrowing from the BCM and commercial banks rose to statutory limits. The private sector and public enterprises were thus forced to borrow increasingly from foreign banks to cover their severe liquidity problems.

As a result of this spiral of debt, in 1985 the government, with IMF and World Bank support, undertook measures to restructure the banking system. Measures taken under the 1985–88 Economic Recovery Program instituted a monetary and credit policy favoring the private sector and an austerity program for the public sector. Furthermore, in 1987 the government, in cooperation with the World Bank, adopted a reform program that focused on three areas: reforming credit policies and banking regulations, strengthening the BCM, and restructuring four of the six commercial banks, including the International Bank of Mauritania (Banque Internationale pour la Mauritanie—BIMA), of which the BCM held 91 percent.

### **Government Finances**

In 1986, with IMF and World Bank support, the government prepared its first consolidated budget. Before this, budgetary procedures covered only expenditures financed through domestic resources. The new procedures covered all financing sources used by the government in a budget encompassing both internally and externally financed current and capital expenditures.

Between 1979 and 1984, expenditures on current operations averaged UM10.5 billion. Typically, domestic revenues covered about two-thirds of this amount; the balance was financed by direct external budgetary support. Between 1978 and 1983, the government wage bill (including military salaries) constituted the largest line item of current expenditures. The second largest expenditure was for equipment and supplies.

In addition to current expenditures, the central government budget allocated smaller amounts for capital expenditures, which amounted to the government's contribution to the public investment program. Capital expenditures accounted for only between 8 and 11 percent of the total budget in the period 1979-83, far less than current expenditures.

Mauritania's domestic revenue base was very narrow and depended on the iron and fishing export industries and the service sector. Total government revenues were derived from taxes and nontax revenues. Between 1981 and 1986, nontax revenues accounted for from 11 to 20 percent of the total and consisted of fish royalties, penalties, and revenue transfers from public enterprises. Tax revenues were derived mainly from taxes on international trade and on income and profits. Between 1981 and 1986, taxes on international trade (of which import taxes were the most important) averaged 41 percent of all revenues, and taxes on income and profits represented 26 percent. Taxes on wages and salaries averaged more than 14 percent of all government revenues for this period.

### **Balance of Payments, Debt, and Foreign Assistance**

The economic stagnation that had begun by the mid-1970s led to deficits in the country's current account balance (see fig. 10). These deficits were largely the result of a slump in the international iron industry and a rise in the price of oil. They were exacerbated, however, by drought and by Mauritania's involvement in the Western Sahara conflict. Between 1975 and 1982, the current account deficit more than quadrupled, rising from US\$62 million to US\$277 million. This trend slowed after 1982 as the trade deficit improved, principally because of increased fish exports and because of IMF- and World Bank-supported stabilization programs. By 1985 the current account deficit had been reduced by more than half from its 1982 high.

By 1985 Mauritania had one of the worst international debt situations in the world. In that year, total accumulated medium- and long-term external public debt stood at US\$1.8 billion, which amounted to nearly 250 percent of GDP. By 1987 arrears on scheduled payments amounted to around US\$200 million. The bulk of the loans falling due were contracted in the mid-1970s to finance the nationalization of the iron mining industry and to pay for the country's involvement in the Western Sahara war.

Mauritania's clear inability to meet its debt service obligations resulted in international intervention. In 1985 the World Bank held a special donor conference, and in 1985 and 1986 the Paris Club

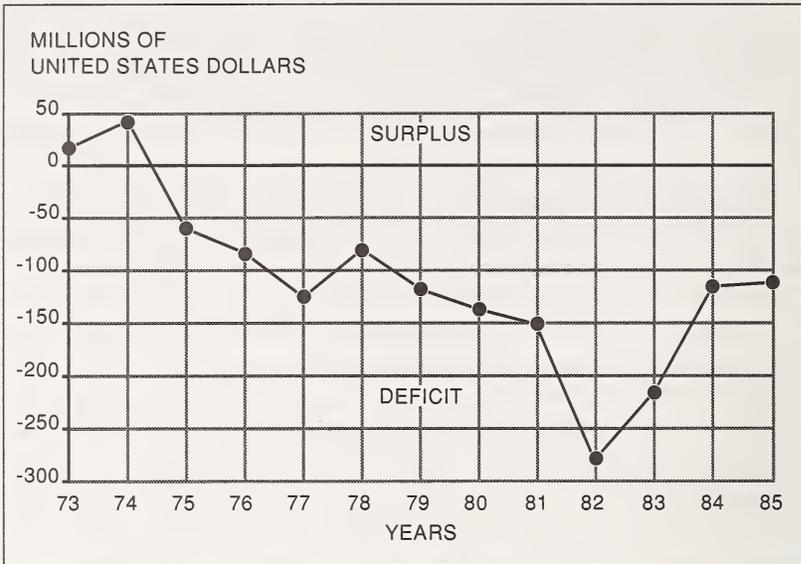


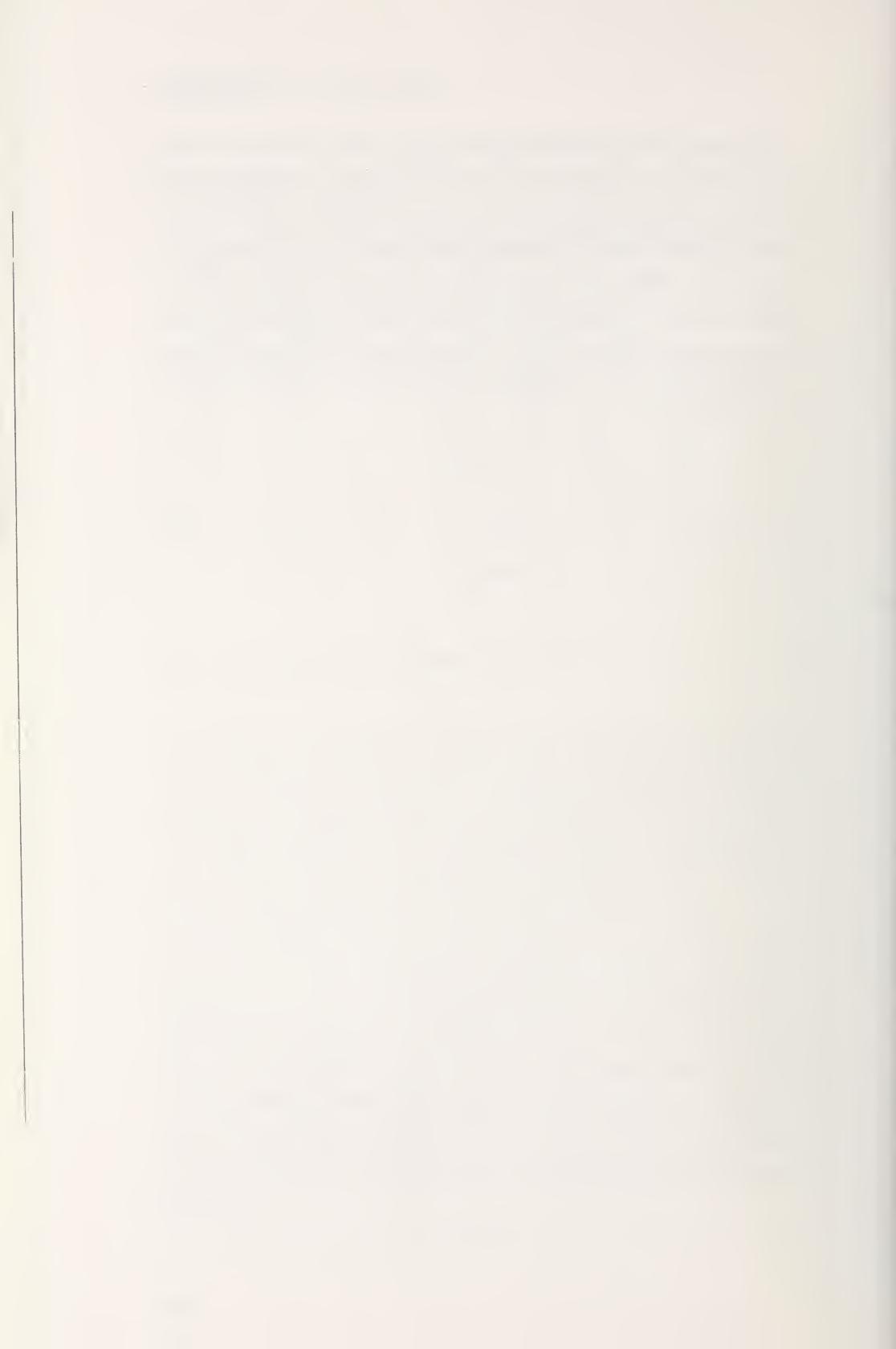
Figure 10. Current Account Balance, 1973-85

(see Glossary) held several meetings on the issue. During this series of meetings, Mauritania presented a new economic and financial recovery program to the donors. This group endorsed the recovery program and rescheduled external debt service due in 1985 and 1986. As a result, all arrears on debt services were eliminated, and Mauritania's external current account deficit was reduced. In 1987 Mauritania signed a comprehensive Structural Adjustment Program with the World Bank that was to ease further its debt burden.

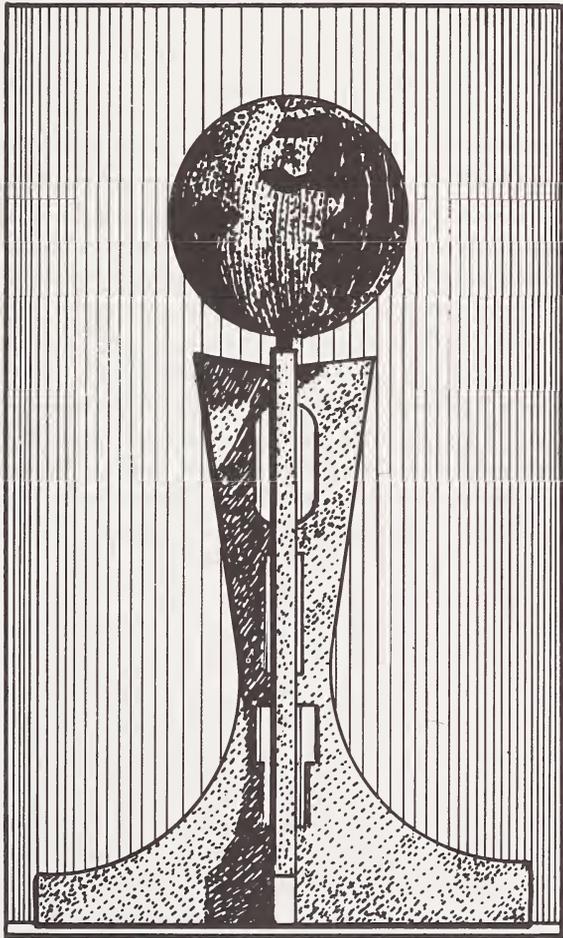
Foreign assistance was vital to Mauritania to satisfy the country's need for food, equipment, technical assistance, and public investment. Some forty nations and multilateral institutions extended aid averaging about US\$270 million a year between 1980 and 1985—equivalent to US\$170 per capita. Particularly important has been aid from oil-rich Arab nations who look favorably on Mauritania because of its largely Muslim population. Typically, foreign assistance funded humanitarian efforts or investment projects. Much of this assistance was in the form of outright grants or loans carrying low interest rates, long maturity terms, and grace periods.

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Economic data on Mauritania are scarce. The most comprehensive information was gleaned from publications of international development organizations, such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and assorted agencies of the United Nations. Several United States government offices also have produced studies on certain aspects of the economy, such as mining, trade, and agriculture. The annual *Africa South of the Sahara* provided up-to-date information, as did the periodicals *Africa Economic Digest*, the Economist Intelligence Unit's *Country Report*, and *Marchés tropicaux et Méditerranéens*. (For further information and complete citations, see Bibliography.)



## Chapter 4. Government and Politics



*Mauritania, outlined on globe in front of Ministry of Defense*

MAURITANIA'S GOVERNANCE EPITOMIZES a cycle all too evident throughout sub-Saharan Africa. A civilian government, espousing the liberal democratic principles inherited from the colonial regime, came to power on the eve of independence. After it had ruled for nearly a generation, during which time the expectations born at independence remained largely unfulfilled and government became increasingly capricious and corrupt, a military regime toppled the civilian government and suspended the Constitution. In the following years, a succession of military rulers, each promising to end the corruption, abuse of authority, and economic waste of earlier regimes, proved as unwilling and inept as their civilian predecessor at ensuring the territorial integrity of the state, achieving national unity, and fostering economic development in the face of severe environmental challenges. The subsequent ascendancy in 1987 of what appeared to be a reformist government, albeit military, demonstrated for the first time Mauritania's growing understanding of the limits of government as this new regime grappled with the problem of adapting the long-standing cultural values of a very poor society to the needs of a modern developing state.

Prior to independence, Mauritania served as a bridge between the Maghrib (see Glossary) and West Africa, with strong cultural links to the former and equally strong economic and administrative ties to the latter. Like Sudan and Chad, which also link Arab North Africa with black Africa, Mauritania suffered internal social and political problems as cultures collided. The potential for conflict was strengthened by the proliferation of particularist-regional political parties before independence. These parties, composed exclusively of either Arab-Berbers (Maures) or one of several black ethnic groups and advocating union with Arab Morocco or with black Mali, tended to aggravate existing cleavages.

To overcome the structural problems intrinsic to the Mauritanian polity, its first president, Moktar Ould Daddah, resorted to one-party rule with a strong executive branch. Although the Constitution of 1961 called for some power-sharing between the president and the legislature, the National Assembly, in practice, routinely supported presidential initiatives, and government remained highly centralized. Daddah's ill-fated participation in the Western Sahara (see Glossary) conflict and the resulting ruin of the Mauritanian economy led to a military coup in July 1978. Daddah was detained and later exiled, and his government was replaced by the

eighteen-member Military Committee for National Recovery (Comité Militaire de Redressement National—CMRN) with Lieutenant Colonel Mustapha Salek as president.

During the next six years, ensuing military regimes failed to resolve the thorny issue of Mauritania's involvement in the Western Sahara and failed to improve Mauritania's dismal economic performance. On December 12, 1984, Chief of Staff and former Minister of Defense Maaouiya Ould Sid 'Ahmed Taya led a group of dissident officers who staged a palace coup against head of state Lieutenant Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla.

Still in power in late 1987, the military government under President Taya has eschewed ideological labels. Initially, Taya's policies reflected the amalgam of private capitalism and state ownership of industry common throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In his first interviews as president, Taya pledged that his administration would respect human rights, end corruption, and promote national unity. In one of his first acts, he freed thirty-two political prisoners seized by his predecessor. He also promised to hold elections for municipal councils in Mauritania's thirteen largest urban areas before the end of 1986, ostensibly to encourage local initiatives but also to appease ethnically based interests. The elections, whose fairness was acclaimed by independent observers, took place on December 19, 1986, and more were promised for smaller towns. As for a return to civilian rule, Taya insisted in March 1985 that Mauritians must first develop an understanding of civic participation in order to avoid the divisions and paralysis that characterized the final years of Haidalla's government.

Mauritania has joined the Nonaligned Movement and has sought to establish friendly relations with both East and West. In response to Morocco's irredentist claims through the 1960s, Mauritania appealed for and received support from France and Western and African allies. That support continued as Mauritania's fortunes in the Western Sahara conflict deteriorated in the late 1970s and Morocco's challenges to Mauritania's borders mounted. As its own economy faltered and its dependence on loans and grants deepened, Mauritania improved its ties with wealthier Middle Eastern and Maghribi states at the expense of its relations with black Africa. In a further attempt to find aid, the government has moved away from total reliance on the West and strengthened relations with the Soviet Union and China.

## **Political Culture**

### **Attitudes Toward the Political System**

Attitudes toward the political system in Mauritania were like those found in other developing African countries undergoing a

similar nation-building process. Mauritanian society had both a modern sector and a rural, traditional sector. Each nurtured vastly different expectations of the political system, a split that gave rise to two political subcultures. Although these two subcultures were often depicted as polar opposites, membership was not exclusive; in fact, most Mauritanians participated to varying degrees in each. Perhaps what most distinguished modern elites from those labeled traditional was the former's greater reliance on modern technology and its commitment to economic development.

The less educated, subsistence society offered little support to the modern, urban political system. Its members participated only insofar as government welfare programs, taxes, or laws impinged on their lives. To many Mauritanians, national government signified only President Taya and did not imply any further loyalty to government, state, or nation. For this sector, citizenship meant respect for tradition, maintenance of social status, and rigid rules of behavior (see *Changing Social Patterns*, ch. 2). Accordingly, traditional injunctions against rising above one's inherited class stifled economic activity among black groups as well as among Maures. Maures of high status often viewed economic activity, such as earning a salary, with disdain. By the same traditions, women were accorded only a minor role in politics.

Although traditional elites dominated local politics in rural areas, a modernizing elite, which constituted approximately 10 percent of the population, greatly influenced national and urban politics. That elite comprised senior military officers, government workers, wealthy businessmen, union members (especially teachers), and students. Insofar as economic development was dependent on national unity and a less rigid social structure, the members of the modernizing elite were also committed to the progressive transformation, with its concomitant dislocations, of traditional society through the agency of the state. Among the modern elite, political consciousness remained high, even if military rule limited opportunities for participation.

The political goals of the modernizing elite were initially articulated by Daddah and were retained in 1987 under the Taya administration. These goals included cultural independence, economic development, and democracy. The conditions for cultural independence, according to Daddah, included bilingualism, a revitalization of Islam through a return to its original precepts, and a more prominent role for women. Cultural independence was not to be construed as a return to precolonial social mores, but rather as an adaptation of Mauritania's unique cultural heritage. Economic independence, according to Daddah, meant "mauritanization" of

the labor force, restrictions on the repatriation of funds by foreign-owned firms, and diversification of Mauritania's sources of external aid, most of which came from France. Democracy, the third of Daddah's goals, meant popular participation, especially by women and youth, in the management of public policy.

The military rulers who succeeded Daddah have implicitly adopted his perspective. Since the 1978 coup, Mauritania has imposed bilingualism, incorporated the Islamic legal code, elevated women within the government, made the study of Arabic an educational requirement, borrowed from an ever-increasing list of donors, limited foreign participation in industry while replacing foreigners with Mauritians, and held elections to promote participation in local politics.

Thus, in Mauritania in the mid-1980s traditional outlooks based on custom, family ties, and Islam were gradually giving way to a more modern set of political views based on codified laws and procedures, achievement, and a national consciousness. More and more, individuals tended to rely on the modern political institutions of society (government, interest groups, police, and the like) to satisfy their needs, rather than on traditional political and religious leaders. This process has been hastened by a protracted drought during the 1970s and 1980s. Over a period of approximately fifteen years, 60 percent of Mauritania's previously nomadic people, who constituted 80 percent of the total population, resettled in urban areas, with many becoming dependent on government aid programs. The resettlement in towns has markedly altered traditional economic patterns and political alliances.

### **Impediments to Change**

In 1987 the pace of modernization remained slow in Mauritania, where much of the population was closely bound to traditional subsistence agriculture and pastoralism and where literacy in French or Arabic was limited to only about 18 percent of the population. Although the modernizing elite shared with the traditional elite and the Mauritanian masses a common history and religion that prevented the state from collapsing, centrifugal forces competed for scarce economic and political resources. These forces ranged from ethnic groups and tribes to occupational and social classes.

An even greater impediment to development and modernization was the cleavage between the Maures and Mauritania's black population, the size of which has never been precisely ascertained and may be either undercounted or overrepresented, depending on one's perspective. Historically, the Maures have discriminated against the black population, which, well into the twentieth century,

continued to be a source of slaves (see Maures, ch. 2). Different languages and a fairly uncomplicated geographic split tended to reinforce racial differences. Moreover, the black southern portion of the country, which was predominantly agricultural and until independence had generated much of the country's wealth, lost economic and political influence as mining and fishing investments in the Maure northern portion achieved far greater economic importance beginning in the late 1960s. By the mid-1980s, however, the economic pendulum began to swing back again as mining and fishing revenues leveled off or began dropping while the relentless process of desertification had increased the value of black-held lands along the Senegal River. Nevertheless, blacks still complained that the government allocated greater resources to projects benefiting the Maures than to those benefiting blacks.

## **Governmental Power**

Mauritania's experiment with one-party democracy ended with the replacement of Daddah's government by the CMRN on July 10, 1978. In April 1979, following the coup that brought Lieutenant Colonel Haidalla to power, the CMRN became the Military Committee for National Salvation (Comité Militaire de Salut National—CMSN). The Taya government came to power following a bloodless palace coup on December 12, 1984 (see Political Disintegration, ch. 1). To justify the reorganization, President Taya and members of the CMSN charged Haidalla with excluding his colleagues on the CMSN from the decision-making process. The CMSN also expressed concern over the impact of the Structures for Educating the Masses (Structures pour l'Education des Masses—SEM), a grass-roots network established by Haidalla in 1982 to lobby on behalf of his policies toward the Polisario (see Glossary). Over time, the SEM had become both the center of a personality cult and an alternative political apparatus. Finally, the new leaders pointed to evidence of corruption, which, if not benefiting Haidalla directly, profited family, friends, and the Polisario guerrillas.

## **Constitution**

The military regime that toppled Daddah in 1978 abolished the Constitution that had been ratified on May 20, 1961. Then in December 1980, when he unexpectedly announced a return to civilian rule, Haidalla promulgated a new provisional constitution. That draft constitution provided for a multiparty system and freedom of association, provisions Haidalla hoped would attract support from the labor union movement. Following an abortive coup attempt

in March 1981 by former members of the military government, however, Haidalla reneged on his intention of returning Mauritania to civilian rule and scrapped the draft constitution.

The Constitutional Charter of the CMSN, which was promulgated on February 9, 1985, served as a *de facto* constitution in 1987. The charter unequivocally eliminated any of the pretenses of democracy embodied in the 1961 constitution. At the same time, it pledged adherence to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, in Article 14, presaged a return to democratic institutions and a new constitution that would bear some semblance to the 1961 Constitution.

The 1961 Constitution clearly reflected the influence of the Constitution of the French Fifth Republic in its dedication to liberal democratic principles and inalienable human rights as expressed in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In addition, the Constitution underscored the state's determined quest for independence and unity by proclaiming Islam the official religion. Somewhat paradoxically, freedom of religion was also guaranteed. Strict adherence to both sets of principles would seemingly have given rise to conflict, especially in the area of jurisprudence; however, in practice the government sought with acceptable success to balance the demands of the two.

Under the Constitution, the government was composed of three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. The executive branch was headed by the president of the republic and included ministers whom he appointed and the administrative bureaucracy. The president was elected by universal suffrage for a five-year term and could serve an indefinite number of terms. From 1966 until the coup in 1978, all candidates for the office had to be nominated by the Mauritanian People's Party (Parti du Peuple Mauritanienne—PPM), be at least thirty-five years old, and have full exercise of their political and civil rights. In sharp contrast to its French antecedent, the Mauritanian Constitution strengthened presidential power by combining it with the function of prime minister, while making the National Assembly subordinate. Like a prime minister, the president participated in legislative processes that would otherwise reside in the domain of the National Assembly. At the same time, the Constitution prevented the president from dissolving the National Assembly, and it also denied the assembly the right to unseat the president by means of a vote of no confidence.

In its entirety, the Constitution came to resemble those of other francophone African states that were also adopted under the influence of General Charles de Gaulle's Fifth Republic and in

response to the perceived need for strong, centralized leadership. In light of the highly fragmented polities typical of much of sub-Saharan Africa at that time, however, a system of checks and balances was thought to be overly cumbersome for the immediate tasks at hand.

Other presidential powers included commanding the armed forces; appointing civil servants, military officers, judges, and ambassadors; ratifying treaties and other international agreements; initiating or amending legislation; eliciting advisory opinions on proposed legislation from the Supreme Court; and exercising a temporary veto over legislation. Perhaps the president's greatest power lay in his right, in times of peril, to declare an emergency and exercise extraconstitutional authority.

The National Assembly was subordinate to the president. At independence, the assembly numbered forty deputies, all of whom were elected as a slate by universal suffrage for five-year terms. By 1971 the number had grown to fifty and by 1975 to seventy-eight, including the new deputies from the annexed portion of the Western Sahara, Tiris al Gharbiyya. The presidency of the assembly was the second highest position in the government and often the locus of traditionalist opposition to Daddah. Along with three vice presidents and two secretaries, the president of the assembly was elected from among the deputies. The assembly's limited power derived from Article 39 of the Constitution and included the formulation of broad policies on national defense, education, labor, and public administration. The assembly also had responsibility for legislating civil rights and taxation. All other legislative powers, including the implementation of specific policy decisions, fell to the president. In general, Daddah's handling of policy matters underscored the imbalance between the two branches of government. For example, although the president was required to present an annual message to the nation and might also provide supplemental statements to the assembly, he alone determined what information to share with legislators, who could not compel him to be more forthcoming. The president could also bypass the legislature completely by submitting proposed legislation to a popular referendum. Finally, the assembly's relatively short session, fixed at four months per year, limited the amount of legislation it could pass.

Constitutional amendments were permissible if they did not threaten the state or its republican form of government. Either the president or the National Assembly could propose an amendment, which would then require a two-thirds vote in the legislature in order to become law. If the proposed amendment received only a simple majority, the president could submit it as a referendum.

In fact, the latter process was never necessary. Two major amendments were passed in the 1960s, one in 1965 institutionalizing one-party government, and a second in 1968 pertaining to local administration, the status of magistrates, and the designation of Hassaniya Arabic as an official language.

Although the Constitution did not provide for a system of checks and balances, the assembly did have three ways to limit presidential power. First, it could refuse requested budgetary appropriations, although the president could circumvent the assembly's budgetary veto by simply promulgating an interim budget based on total receipts of the previous year. Second, if able to muster a two-thirds vote, the assembly could impeach the president or any of his ministers for treason or plotting against the state. The Supreme Court, a body appointed by the president, would judge the charges in such cases. Finally, the assembly could, in effect, override a presidential veto if, after a second reading, the law received an absolute majority in the assembly and was declared constitutional by the Supreme Court.

In fact, the assembly's debates and votes were most often highly symbolic gestures that brought closure to a process initiated and dominated by the executive. In the early 1960s, however, the legislature often challenged the executive, only to be deluged with priority bills that in effect smothered any legislative initiatives. With the institutionalization of one-party rule in 1965, engaging debate in the assembly was no longer possible, and the assembly's role became promotion of political integration at the expense of individual rights while strengthening party unity and discipline.

### **Constitutional Charter**

Like the Constitution, the Constitutional Charter of February 1985 pledged adherence to principles embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the charters of the United Nations (UN), the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and the League of Arab States (Arab League). The charter also proclaimed Islam the state religion and sharia (see Glossary) the only source of law.

The fundamental powers and responsibilities of the CMSN, outlined in Article 3 of the charter, included establishing the general policies of the nation, promulgating ordinances to carry out policy, monitoring actions of the government, ratifying international agreements, and granting amnesty except in cases of retributory justice and religious crimes (see Law and Crime, ch. 5). Articles 4 through 10 pertained to the internal organization of the CMSN and presidential succession. Members were nominated to the

CMSN by ordinance of that body, and it alone decided the procedures by which it would conduct its business. Included within the CMSN was the Permanent Committee, consisting of all CMSN members posted to Nouakchott. The Permanent Committee met in ordinary session once every fifteen days and in extraordinary session when convoked by the president. The CMSN was required to meet in ordinary session every third month and in extraordinary session when convoked by the president after approval of the Permanent Committee, or upon the request of one-third of the members. If the president were temporarily absent, the president of the CMSN would nominate a member of the Permanent Committee to carry out the routine affairs of state. If the president were temporarily incapacitated, the Permanent Committee would nominate one of its members to manage affairs of state for a period not to exceed one month. In the event of the president's death or a long-term incapacitation, the Permanent Committee would designate one of its members to carry out the functions of president for one week, after which the entire CMSN would appoint a new president from among its members.

Articles 11 and 12 determined the manner in which the president nominated civilian and military members of government. As head of state and commander in chief of the armed forces, the president made all nominations for civilian and military posts and for members of the government. Similarly, he could dismiss an appointee at any time. The final four articles of the Constitutional Charter dealt with maintenance of public order and enforcement of CMSN ordinances.

A second ordinance, promulgated at the same time as the charter, governed the internal organization of the CMSN and supplemented the charter. The preamble to this ordinance unequivocally entrusted the CMSN with national sovereignty and legitimacy, but only until replaced by democratic institutions.

The first three articles established *de jure* membership and rank in the CMSN and delineated the relationship between members of the government and the CMSN. Members of the CMSN ranked higher than members of the government. Accordingly, no member of the CMSN could be sued, searched, arrested, held, or tried while carrying out official duties. No member could be arrested or sued in criminal cases or minor offenses without authorization from either the full CMSN or the Permanent Committee, unless caught in *flagrante delicto*.

The second article dealt with the selection and responsibilities of the president of the CMSN, who was chosen in a secret ballot by a two-thirds majority of its members and could be deposed in

the same way. The president presided over debates and ensured that the Permanent Committee complied with the charter and the committee's regulations. He also controlled debate and could suspend the session at any time. Internally, the CMSN included five advisory commissions dealing with cultural and social affairs, security affairs, public works and development, economy and financial affairs, and education and justice. The commissions monitored the implementation of policy in their respective areas.

In reality, the CMSN in 1987 was a coterie of officers, most of whom were Maures, representing a variety of sometimes overlapping and sometimes discrete corporate and ethnic interests. Among its members, rank, status, and influence varied widely. In debates, which were resolved by consensus, the opinions and positions of the acknowledged "big men" were not likely to be challenged openly by members of lower status, who instead might have engaged in surreptitious maneuvering or plotting behind the scenes. The most powerful member of the CMSN in the late 1980s was Taya, who was often described as hardworking and dedicated and whose achievements were the result of strength of purpose rather than political ambition. The second most powerful figure was the minister of interior, information, and telecommunications, Lieutenant Colonel Djibril Ould Abdallah, who was often described as "Taya's strongman."

The military government operated through a cabinet whose members, both civilian and military, were appointed by the president, presumably after consultation with members of the CMSN. In 1987 approximately one-third of the fifteen cabinet ministers were also members of the CMSN, although that ratio changed with every cabinet reshuffle. Cabinet officers were responsible for implementing policies initiated by the CMSN.

### **Legal System**

Through the 1960s and early 1970s, Mauritania's legal system bore the imprint of the French legal and judicial system. As the number of legal cadres rose, so did attempts to reconcile secular and Islamic law. In the meantime, Islamic courts coexisted alongside secular courts based on the French model. Neither appellate courts nor courts with constitutional jurisdiction existed. There were few secular lawyers; Mauritania's first French-trained lawyer was Daddah. The 1961 Constitution provided that French laws were to remain in effect until amended or repealed, as were French civil, commercial, and penal codes. The first Mauritanian chief justice of the Supreme Court was not appointed until November 1965, in accordance with a law requiring that a Muslim fill the position.

As late as 1968, fully one-quarter of Mauritania's judges (including almost all the secular law judges) were French. Only in the early 1970s were new labor and nationality codes adopted, along with new codes of penal, civil, commercial, and administrative procedure.

The sharia Islamic code, which was instituted in 1980, served as the law of the land in civil matters, except in certain so-called modern areas, such as nationality law and litigation involving corporations, automobiles, and aircraft (see *Tenets of Islam*, ch. 2). Sharia also covered such areas of public law as theft and murder. As in French law, no one was presumed innocent; thus an inability to convince the sitting magistrate that the government's charges were erroneous in itself constituted proof of guilt, as did firsthand testimony from a witness or codefendant. Defendants had the right to counsel and could appeal a verdict to the Supreme Court within fifteen days. As in secular courts, circumstantial evidence was inadmissible as proof of guilt. Plea bargaining was also common. Although Mauritanian law guaranteed expeditious arraignment and trial, the slow functioning of the state's inadequately funded judicial system frequently resulted in long pretrial detentions. Under legislation approved by the increasingly isolated President Daddah just prior to the 1978 coup, the state arrogated the authority to detain without trial or appeal anyone judged to be a national security threat. (The Taya government exercised that prerogative in September 1986 when it arrested thirteen blacks from the Toucouleur ethnic group, including prominent educators, politicians, and media figures, on charges of sedition and threatening national security.)

Although nearly all of Mauritania is Muslim, some opposition to the institution of sharia was expressed by blacks and women, who believed that it discriminated in favor of the white, Maure male population. Meanwhile, communal tensions resulting from a strict interpretation of sharia have waned over the years as courts have moderated their interpretation. This moderation has not prevented the government from more fully implementing previously ignored provisions of sharia, however. In October 1986, the government interdicted the introduction and sale of alcohol in Mauritania to all but foreign diplomats and technical assistants working for the government. Punishment for violating the ban was to be forty lashes administered in public as prescribed by sharia.

At the top of the judicial system in 1987 was the Supreme Court, which had six permanent members, including a president, who had to be a jurist in both Islamic and secular law. In addition, court members included two vice presidents, one Islamic and one secular; two ordinary counselors, also one Islamic and one secular; and

a financial counselor, who served a two-year term and was selected jointly by the ministries of justice and finance. The six judges did not sit together to hear cases; the number and type of judge (secular or Islamic) depended on the nature of the case. The court had three areas of competence: appellate review, administrative litigation, and financial oversight. The Supreme Court also heard questions on constitutionality.

In judging constitutional cases before the 1978 coup, the court included only five judges: the president, the two vice presidents, and two extraordinary counselors, one of whom was appointed by the president of the republic and the other by the president of the National Assembly; both extraordinary counselors served two-year terms. (Under military rule, both were chosen by the head of state with advice from the CMSN.) The court ruled on the constitutionality of proposed projects, laws, or treaties at the request of the president; determined the eligibility of presidential candidates; adjudicated electoral disputes; and supervised referenda and censuses. The court also closely supervised the normal activities of the National Assembly, ensuring its conformity to the Constitution. As the final appellate court, the Supreme Court heard appeals from the Court of First Instance and the Labor Court or appeals based on the lack of jurisdiction or a violation of due process from any other court. As an administrative court, it had first and final jurisdiction in litigation concerning state-owned property, the status of civil servants, and public administration. In its financial oversight role, the Supreme Court verified public accounts and imposed sanctions on civil servants found guilty of fraud or mismanagement.

### **Local Government**

The 1961 Constitution kept the highly centralized colonial structure of counties (*cercles*), subdivisions (*sous-préfectures*), and administrative posts. Local councils were established in the twelve *cercles*—the French created eleven *cercles* coterminous with the old amirates, and the newly independent government created a twelfth *cercle*, Tiris Zemmour, out of northern Adrar—as representative and administrative bodies to replace the chiefs and councils of notables through whom the French ruled. By 1961 urban and rural communes had been created, and rudimentary representative councils had been established with elected mayors in the urban communes. There were five urban communes modeled after similar bodies in France in Rosso, Kaédi, Atar, Bogué, and Nouakchott (see fig. 1). Three experimental communes were established in Nouadhibou, 'Ayoûn el 'Atroûs, and Fdêrik. Although the government attempted to give the councils and mayors of the communes control over communal



*National College of Administration, Nouakchott  
Courtesy Derwood Staeben  
Palace of Justice, Nouakchott  
Courtesy Derwood Staeben*

legislation, the communes failed to fulfill any meaningful function for lack of trained and experienced managerial cadres and for want of resources to support local administration. With the Law of March 4, 1968, the rural communes were abolished, and less than a year later the urban and experimental communes were also eliminated. Local administration reverted to the traditional authorities, who became the links between the rulers and the rest of the population.

On July 30, 1968, the resources and functions of the former communes were transferred to twelve regions and one district (Nouakchott) in sweeping reforms of local administration. Each of the regions, which were generally coterminous with the former *cercles*, were subdivided into *départements*, generally coterminous with the former *sous-préfectures*, and further divided into *arrondissements*, corresponding to the former administrative posts. A thirteenth region encompassing Tiris al Gharbiyya (that part of Western Sahara claimed by Mauritania) was created in 1976; however, it was abandoned when Mauritania withdrew from the Western Sahara conflict. The state viewed the regions as serving as administrative subdivisions and as independent judicial districts.

Each region was headed by a governor representing the central government. The governor headed the administrative bureaucracy of the region, ensured the execution of laws and regulations, and coordinated state services (except for military and judicial activities). Under his authority were *préfets*, who administered *départements*, as well as other civil servants of the region. The governor's staff also included two assistants responsible for administration and economic and social development. The governor and his two assistants were appointed by the president.

Each region had a regional assembly of twenty to thirty members (*conseillers*) named by presidential decree from a list of nominees presented by the party. The *conseillers* served with no pay for five years. The regional assemblies had only minimal autonomy. The regional budgets for which they voted were prepared by the government in Nouakchott and included mandatory expenses, such as the cost of administration and maintenance of local roads and secondary airports. Regional assemblies could also levy taxes on certain specified goods and allocate a portion of their budgetary subvention from the central government to discretionary items. In spite of these apparent moves toward decentralization, effective control remained with the central government in the name of forging national unity. Regional assemblies served only to disseminate orders and information from Nouakchott, and not to mediate between local and centralized authority.

Under military rule, the government no longer pursued even the pretense of democracy. Although the office of regional governor was retained, the regional assemblies, like the National Assembly, were eliminated. In addition to a regional governor with responsibility for regional administration, six regions also had a regional military commander responsible for maintaining internal security, a task that included monitoring and controlling political dissent within his region. The two regions classified as autonomous military sectors also had military commanders with responsibilities similar to those of the regular commanders.

### **Local Elections**

To appease the demands of ethnic minorities and diminish the role and obligations of an already overburdened government, Taya's government hesitantly took the first steps toward democratization and decentralization. In December 1986, residents of Nouakchott and Mauritania's regional capitals, by then numbering twelve, voted for candidates for thirteen municipal councils. The municipal councils consisted of either thirty or thirty-six members, depending on the size of the constituency. For example, the Atar council had thirty seats; Zoufât had thirty-six. The councils assumed responsibility for local economic and financial planning and for cultural activities; however, as in the old regional assemblies, theirs was a limited autonomy. In addition to the elected *conseillers* and mayor, each council included an agent of the state with the title of secretary general, appointed by the minister of interior, information, and telecommunications. The ostensible task of the secretaries general was to provide managerial expertise to the elected *conseillers* and mayor, none of whom may have had previous administrative experience. At the same time, however, the secretaries general acted as representatives of the central government and thus fulfilled the Taya government's objective of decentralizing while maintaining national control.

Membership in the municipal councils was determined by popular vote with universal suffrage and secret ballots. Locally based political parties, some of which had ties with parties in other areas and all of which included as part of their name the word *union*, nominated slates for all or a portion of the seats on the council. Debate dealt exclusively with local issues, and a limit of four candidates represented the four slates contesting each seat. The campaigns and elections in December 1986 were conducted in what has been characterized as a surprisingly decorous manner, with between 48 and 65 percent of the electorate voting. To its credit, the government refused to inflate vote totals as is often customary

elsewhere in the Third World. In four of the thirteen municipalities, no slate won a majority during the first round of voting, so a runoff vote was held a week later on December 26, 1986. Once seated, the councils elected mayors who, in every city except Nouakchott, had headed the majority slate in the council. In the capital, Mohamed Ould Mah, who headed the Union for Progress and Brotherhood minority slate, won an unexpected victory over the leader of the majority National Democratic Union slate.

In some respects, the election of municipal councils seemed little more than a repeat of earlier, somewhat pretentious attempts to bring the trappings of representative democracy to a society unaccustomed to mass political participation. But unlike earlier efforts, which were inappropriate copies of the colonial administration, the new councils had organic roots and modest aspirations. In light of the paucity of resources available to the mayors and the councils, foreign observers doubted that this experiment in democracy would resolve Mauritania's profound economic and political problems. Nevertheless, the Taya regime asserted that the elections were but a first step in the long-term process of democratization.

### **Political Power in the Mid-1980s**

Upon taking office in 1984, Taya pledged to promote political unity and stability by improving the economy, redressing the erosion of civil and human rights, and ensuring Mauritania's strict neutrality in the Western Sahara conflict. During the first two years of Taya's administration, Mauritania's economic performance improved, even though attempts to halt or slow desertification proved ineffectual (see Balance of Payments, Debt, and Foreign Assistance, ch. 3). Revenues from agriculture, mining, and fishing increased from the depressed levels of the drought years; the rate of inflation decreased; and the World Bank (see Glossary) stepped up lending, following a currency devaluation in 1985. In keeping with his promise concerning human rights, in late 1984 and early 1985 Taya freed many of the political prisoners jailed by his predecessor. More important, he successfully organized Mauritania's first elections.

Taya himself, known as a diligent, loyal, disinterested professional, remained a popular figure. At least at the outset, his tenure attracted support from Mauritania's principal constituencies, including *harratin* (see Glossary), labor, and students, as well as from the exiled, pro-Moroccan Alliance for a Democratic Mauritania (Alliance pour une Mauritanie Démocratique—AMD) based in Paris and the Organization of Mauritanian Nationalists (Organisation des Nationalistes Mauritaniens) formed in Senegal. His

general amnesty for political prisoners pleased both domestic and external dissidents, and his ban on alcohol won support from Islamic fundamentalists.

In spite of Taya's successes, internal politics in 1987 remained unsettled. Alternative political choices were still banned, and neither of the two exiled dissident groups chose to return. Corruption, which had flourished under Haidalla, was still a significant problem. The number of nomadic herders dropped from 85 percent of the population to 15 percent, with former nomads settling in Nouakchott and other cities and vastly inflating the number of unemployed or underemployed living in *kébés* (shantytowns) surrounding Nouakchott. *Harratin*, who previously had worked for the nomads, also entered the labor market, often in competition with their former employers for scarce or nonexistent jobs. Wealthy speculators exploited the difficulties of the nomads by purchasing their herds at distress prices and then selling them to farmers in the south. The economy, which had rebounded somewhat during Taya's first two years in office, stagnated. The government raised prices for staples and simultaneously devalued the ouguiya. Revenues from mining, fishing and agriculture dropped. To prevent a financial collapse, the World Bank took control of the International Bank of Mauritania (Banque Internationale pour la Mauritanie—BIMA). Finally, southern blacks, and the Toucouleur in particular, charged the Taya government with discrimination and bias, and in frustration they took their grievances to the streets.

Internal divisions based on race remained Taya's most critical domestic problem in 1987, in spite of his insistence that racism was of no consequence in Mauritania. Since independence, some black groups repeatedly had charged the government with discrimination, alleging underrepresentation of blacks in important posts in government, education, and business. Other grievances included supposed favoritism by the state in allocating resources, such as bank loans and scholarships, and a land reform act that seemingly gave Maures preference in the acquisition of irrigated land along the Senegal River. The 1983 Land Reform Act maintained that as the owner of all unimproved and undeeded land, the state had an inherent interest in its development. The act stipulated that in accordance with relevant provisions of sharia, the government was permitted to cede land to those committed to improving it (see Farming, ch. 3). Although the policy of providing parcels of fallow, irrigable land to those willing to farm it was economically sound, ambiguities surrounding the implementation of the Land Reform Act raised the specter of wealthy land speculators from Nouakchott and Nouadhibou appropriating tracts of rich agricultural

land along the Senegal River and displacing blacks whose roots extended back for generations. Complicating the issue was the fact that wealthy blacks from the Senegal River Basin were also interested in assembling large, capital-intensive farms on riparian lands and were very much in favor of the government's efforts on their behalf.

President Taya attempted to deal with racial controversy by creating a national constituency to replace local or regional (often ethnically based) affiliations. To this end, he sought to eliminate racial and ethnic labels. He continued to bring southern blacks and *har-ratin* into his government, in mid-1987 he named three women to cabinet positions, and he earmarked agriculture along the Senegal River, historically a black enterprise, for heavy investment. Notwithstanding such efforts, local blacks, Mauritania's black African neighbors, and many foreign observers shared the perception that Maures formulated and carried out the political agenda. Moreover, frequent cabinet changes, coupled with the rapid rotation of regional governors and military commanders, have prevented Mauritania's political leaders from acquiring managerial expertise.

### **Interest Groups**

In the absence of political parties, in 1987 political demands found informal expression only through the various interest groups within Mauritanian society. Their interaction with the military government provided some indication of the regime's support. Four interest groups offered contrasts in how they related to government: blacks, who questioned the legitimacy of any government headed by Maures; traditional elites, whose importance diminished under the military; women, whose limited political strength has come only at the sufferance of the government; and labor unions. Mauritania's most important interest group was the military, for which the rules of politics were different (see *Role of the Military in Society*, ch. 5).

### **Ethnic Minorities**

In 1987 the most visible political organization among Mauritania's blacks was the African Liberation Forces of Mauritania (Forces Libération Africaine de Mauritanie—FLAM). Founded in 1983 and outlawed in 1984, the group has developed a complex and clandestine organization based in Dakar, Senegal. It drew its membership primarily from the Toucouleur. Among alleged FLAM members arrested by the government in September 1986 were Ibrahima Sarr, a television journalist; Tafsirou Djigo and Mamadou Ly, former cabinet ministers; Mahmoudi Ould Boukhreiss, a

businessman and brother of Colonel Moulay Ould Boukhreiss, a former minister of justice known for his pro-Libyan sentiments; Tène Youssouf Guèye, a writer; Oumar Ba, a noted historian and linguist; and Def Ould Babana, a former diplomat. Several professors and researchers from the University of Nouakchott were also linked to FLAM.

FLAM members have claimed responsibility for distributing a highly articulate, fifty-page pamphlet entitled "Le Manifesto du Nègro-Mauritanien Opprimé" (The Manifesto of the Oppressed Black Mauritanian), documenting alleged examples of officially sanctioned discrimination. Copies of the manifesto were circulated in Addis Ababa during the spring 1986 meetings of the OAU and during the summer 1986 summit meetings of the Nonaligned Movement in Harare, Zimbabwe. FLAM adherents were also charged with instigating a series of attacks in September and October 1986 against a fish-processing facility in Nouadhibou, a pharmacy and gas station in Nouakchott, and three government vehicles. Although damage from the attacks was minimal, they were the first such acts of sabotage in Mauritania and thus represented a dramatic escalation in political violence.

The government responded quickly and harshly to these attacks. It labeled FLAM leaders as "misled persons" intent on "undermining the values and foundations of . . . society" by sowing "hatred and confusion" with the assistance of foreign enemies, possibly Libya. On September 4 and 5, 1986, army and police units arrested between thirty and forty suspected FLAM members. Twenty of the group were later given sentences ranging from six months to five years. Lieutenant Colonel Anne Amadou Babali, the black minister of interior, information and telecommunications, was dismissed from his post, allegedly for ignoring evidence of FLAM's existence. He was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Djibril Ould Abdallah, who was known for his firmness. Also relieved of their positions were Captain Niang Harouna and Commander Diouf Oumar of the Mauritanian Army, as well as the director of BIMA and other highly placed officials elsewhere in government. Most of those dismissed blacks were replaced by other blacks from Wolof or Soninké groups, and only a few were replaced by Maures. None of the new black appointees, however, supported the FLAM agenda.

With its leadership imprisoned or in self-imposed exile, FLAM's activities through the first half of 1987 diminished considerably; nevertheless, discontent among blacks, and especially among the Toucouleur, simmered. Observers speculated that further outbreaks

of violence might erupt if the government attempted to implement its 1983 land reform program on a large scale.

### **Traditional Elites**

Although originally supported by Mauritania's leading chiefs, the PPM in 1963 made the policy decision to suppress the institution of chieftaincies in order to foster unity and allegiance to a national leader. Accordingly, no replacement was chosen for a chief who died or resigned. Nevertheless, traditional rulers continued to play a significant, if decreasing, role in the political system. At the local level, traditional rulers represented the administration with the peasantry, aided in the maintenance of public order, and mobilized resources for public works projects. Chiefs also collected taxes, and in return the government paid their salaries.

On the national level, traditional rulers were most often co-opted and integrated into the party, where they played an important role. Some chiefs or their kin became secretaries of the party committee in their villages; others held civil service positions. Throughout Daddah's stay in office, nearly all his ministers and deputies came from the highest levels of traditional leadership, and especially from marabout (see Glossary) castes. Daddah regularly brought new members of the old elite into the government to improve efficiency and to enlarge his base of support. This changed only when the costs of the war in the Western Sahara threatened the economic well-being of the growing class of technocrats—a new elite—at home.

The 1978 military coup brought another group of traditional elites into government, as leaders of what had been warrior castes (*has-sani*) replaced those of maraboutic groups. Of far greater significance for the long term, however, has been the movement of civilian and military technocrats into positions of political leadership. Taya's 1987 cabinet appointments—such as the new minister of mines and industry, Khadijatou Bint Ahmed, and the new minister of foreign affairs, Commander Mohamed Lemine Ould N'Diayane—have tended to be young (Ahmed, a woman, and N'Diayane are under forty), well educated, motivated, articulate, and energetic politicians.

### **Women**

During the period of civilian government, women were most successful in fulfilling their political demands through the party. Although the constitution guaranteed equality before the law and full rights of political participation, traditional practices effectively denied women any major role in political life. To elicit the support

of women, the PPM created the National Union of Mauritanian Women in 1961. At first oriented only toward such typically feminine issues as health, nutrition, and education, by 1964 it had become the women's political arm of the PPM and was renamed the National Women's Movement (*Mouvement National Féminin*). The organization of the women's movement paralleled that of the PPM, with local committees, sections, and federations, and was headed by an elected bureau. At each level in the hierarchy, an official of the women's organization participated as an *ex officio* member of the respective PPM bureau. Although most women were far from achieving political equality with men, they were able to bring about change in response to some of their demands.

Over the years, several political functions helped to improve the lot of women. The PPM party congress at Kaédi in 1964 condemned abuses of divorce and dowries. The congress at 'Ayoûn el 'Atroûs in 1966 made provisions for the support of dependent children who remained with their mothers following a divorce and created the Superior Council for Women (*Conseil Supérieur des Femmes*), which operated the National Women's Movement. At the Nouakchott party congress in 1968, women's issues received significant attention. The 300 participants, including 11 women, called for the obligatory registration of marriages and divorces to protect women, the enactment of laws to discourage polygyny, limits on the size of dowries, and a code to protect women's rights. In the 1971 elections, two women were elected to the previously all-male National Assembly, and one, Aissatou Kane, was named minister of health and social affairs, becoming the first woman to serve in the government. She remained in office until the 1978 coup.

The pace of change improved under the military government as more women enrolled in schools and joined the labor force. In May 1987, in what was a remarkable step for Mauritania, President Taya named three women to cabinet-level posts to "correct countless managerial mistakes committed in the past." Khadijatou Bint Ahmed of Boutilimit was appointed minister of mines and industries. Lalla Mariam Bint Moulaye was appointed associate director of the presidential cabinet, and N'Deye Tabar Fall became general secretary of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

### **Trade Unions**

The Mauritanian Workers Union (*Union des Travailleurs Mauritaniens—UTM*), created in 1961, was a government-supported federation of all trade unions within the country. Until 1969 the UTM was completely separate from the PPM and the government, although it supported the party and had as many as

seven representatives in the National Assembly. Initially, the UTM was conceived as a radical union in a class-oriented society and was pledged to forward the interests of workers as a class. Accordingly, union leadership ruled out integration with the party, as was customary in most other one-party states in sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, union leaders were not averse to challenging the state. In May 1968, when news of student and worker demonstrations in France reached Mauritania, iron ore workers at Zoufât struck to protest the pay differential, amounting to almost 1,000 percent, between the salaries of West Europeans and Africans. The government called on the army to restore order, a move that resulted in the death of eight workers and injuries to twenty-three.

At the fourth congress of the UTM, held in February 1969, party leaders and UTM leadership proposed incorporating the UTM into the PPM. Several member unions of the UTM denounced both the proposal and UTM leadership, which was described as no longer representing the interests of workers. Subsequently, several unions, including the National Union of Mauritanian Teachers, formally opposed integration with the party and voted to withdraw from the UTM. Under the Directing Committee of Mauritanian Workers, the "Progressive" UTM was formed. The new federation argued that the UTM was now under the control of management and could no longer represent the interests of the working class.

The PPM and the government refused to recognize the new labor federation, arguing that there could be no political activity outside the party. Mauritanian students, on the other hand, supported the new federation and in May 1971 challenged police and army units by demonstrating throughout Mauritania. Workers joined students in protest when miners at Fdêrik closed the mines in September and October 1968.

Subsequent union activity under the military was marked by conflict and confusion. In 1983 Haidalla imprisoned UTM secretary general Elkory Ould H'metty for allegedly having used the UTM for political purposes and on behalf of Libyan interests. Taking over UTM leadership was H'metty's former assistant, Beijel Ould Houmeit, who had been a faithful Haidalla supporter. In 1985 H'metty was freed by President Taya. Nevertheless, Houmeit only begrudgingly yielded power to the erstwhile secretary general. From 1984 until mid-1987, the administration of the UTM was paralyzed, and union locals atrophied. In an effort to secure worker cooperation during the period of recession, the government decided to reinvigorate the UTM. In mid-1987 local offices were being reestablished in major urban areas, and a general UTM congress was tentatively planned for late 1987.



*National Textile Workers Union on parade  
Courtesy Embassy of Mauritania, Washington*

## Foreign Relations

The historic contradictions and competing interests involved in formulating foreign policy have allowed Mauritania's several heads of state to justify a monopoly on foreign policy decision making. As a result, Mauritania's foreign policy, like that of other developing states, represents at once an extension of the president's personality and the embodiment of an otherwise fragile state. Accordingly, Mauritania's foreign policy over the years avoided ideological posturing in favor of pragmatic responses to domestic and foreign pressures. That was particularly true in the mid-1980s when harsh economic realities and the ongoing conflict in the Western Sahara compelled the Taya government to strengthen its ties to France; continue its balancing act among Morocco, Algeria, and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR); and solicit support from as many donors as would come to its aid.

## Foreign Policy

During the late colonial period, Mauritania had few contacts with the other territories of French West Africa (Afrique Occidentale Française—AOF). At the time of the independence referendum in 1958, Mauritania's representatives on the Grand Council of the AOF remained neutral, while all other AOF members divided

between the African Democratic Rally (Rassemblement Démocratique Africain—RDA) and the African Regroupment Party (Parti du Régroupement Africain—PRA). Until Mauritania became independent and Morocco threatened its security, Mauritania did not participate in AOF intraterritorial political, labor, or cultural movements. Only when Mauritania's existence as a state became problematic did it seek international recognition and support.

Throughout the 1960s, Mauritania's main foreign policy objective was preserving its independence in the face of Moroccan irredentism (see Regional Security Concerns, ch. 5). (Morocco finally recognized Mauritanian independence in 1969.) To that end, the Daddah government insisted on maintaining close ties with France, an effort that included allowing France to station troops on Mauritanian soil (see The Independence Period and the French Military Legacy, ch. 5). In Africa, Mauritania established ties with the more conservative francophone countries because all the Arab League states (except Tunisia) and the African members of the Casablanca Group (Ghana, Guinea, and Mali) supported Morocco's irredentist claims.

Mauritania applied for admission to the UN in 1960, sponsored by France, but its membership was vetoed by the Soviet Union, which supported the Arab League. For the most part, black Africa and the West favored Mauritania's admission, and the Soviet Union dropped its opposition in 1961 in exchange for a favorable vote on Mongolia's admission. In a final effort to block Mauritania's admission, Morocco brought the issue to the General Assembly, which supported Mauritania's application by a vote of sixty-eight to thirteen, with twenty abstentions. Mauritania was admitted to the UN on October 27, 1961. Mali, Guinea, and most Arab states supported Morocco in the debate.

In January 1962 Mauritania edged away from its previously conservative, pro-French position by extending recognition to the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic and refusing to attend meetings of the French-backed Common Saharan States Organization. These tentative displays of independence increased Mauritania's credibility with its more progressive African neighbors and emphasized the country's role as a bridge between Arab North Africa and black sub-Saharan Africa. Mauritania and Mali subsequently achieved a rapprochement with the signing of the Treaty of Kayes in February 1963. Relations with Algeria improved when Mauritania supported Algeria in its dispute with Morocco. Egypt, known at the time as the United Arab Republic (UAR) and the acknowledged leader of the Arab world, also sided with Algeria, and on October 21, 1964, the UAR officially extended recognition

to Mauritania. That action encouraged Daddah to undertake an even bolder foreign policy.

In 1963 Mauritania joined the OAU, whereupon Morocco resigned in protest. In 1964 Daddah became the first president of the recently formed Afro-Malagasy Union for Economic Cooperation (Union Africaine et Malagache de Coopération Economique—UAMCE), a loose grouping of francophone African countries pledging technical and cultural cooperation. When the organization was subsequently upgraded to become a political organization in defiance of the OAU charter, Mauritania withdrew from all but the technical committees.

Through the early 1970s, Mauritania continued to play the role of bridge between the Maghrib and sub-Saharan Africa. Mauritania also maintained its commitment to nonalignment while opening relations with Eastern Europe and the radical states of Africa. In support of Arab League and OAU positions, Mauritania did not seek ties with Israel, South Africa, or Portugal. Mauritania finally established diplomatic relations with Morocco in 1969. Close relations with France, on whom Mauritania continued to rely for much of its development aid, remained the cornerstone of Mauritanian foreign policy through the late 1980s.

Spain's withdrawal from the Spanish Sahara and the latter's partition and annexation by Mauritania and Morocco in 1976 inaugurated an eight-year period of conflict and fighting against Polisario guerrillas of the SADR, resulting in military setbacks and stagnating diplomacy for Mauritania (see *Conflict in the Western Sahara*, ch. 1). Upon annexation, Mauritania's former ally Algeria severed its ties with the Daddah government in support of the SADR. From 1976 to 1979, Polisario guerrillas increased pressure on Mauritania and launched commando attacks against Fd'rik and Nouakchott. As a consequence of the economic and political costs of the fighting, the military successors to Daddah attempted to disengage Mauritania from the conflict; nevertheless, Polisario forces penetrated Mauritania's defenses, often with impunity, to infiltrate fighters into the Western Sahara. Subsequently, relations with Morocco again deteriorated and then finally ruptured in 1981 when Mauritania accused Morocco of backing a coup attempt in Nouakchott. Conversely, relations with the Polisario and Algeria improved. In December 1983, Algeria, Tunisia, and Mauritania signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship. The following year Haidalla extended diplomatic recognition and support to the SADR, an action that ultimately led to the downfall of his government. President Taya maintained ties with the SADR, but the link was

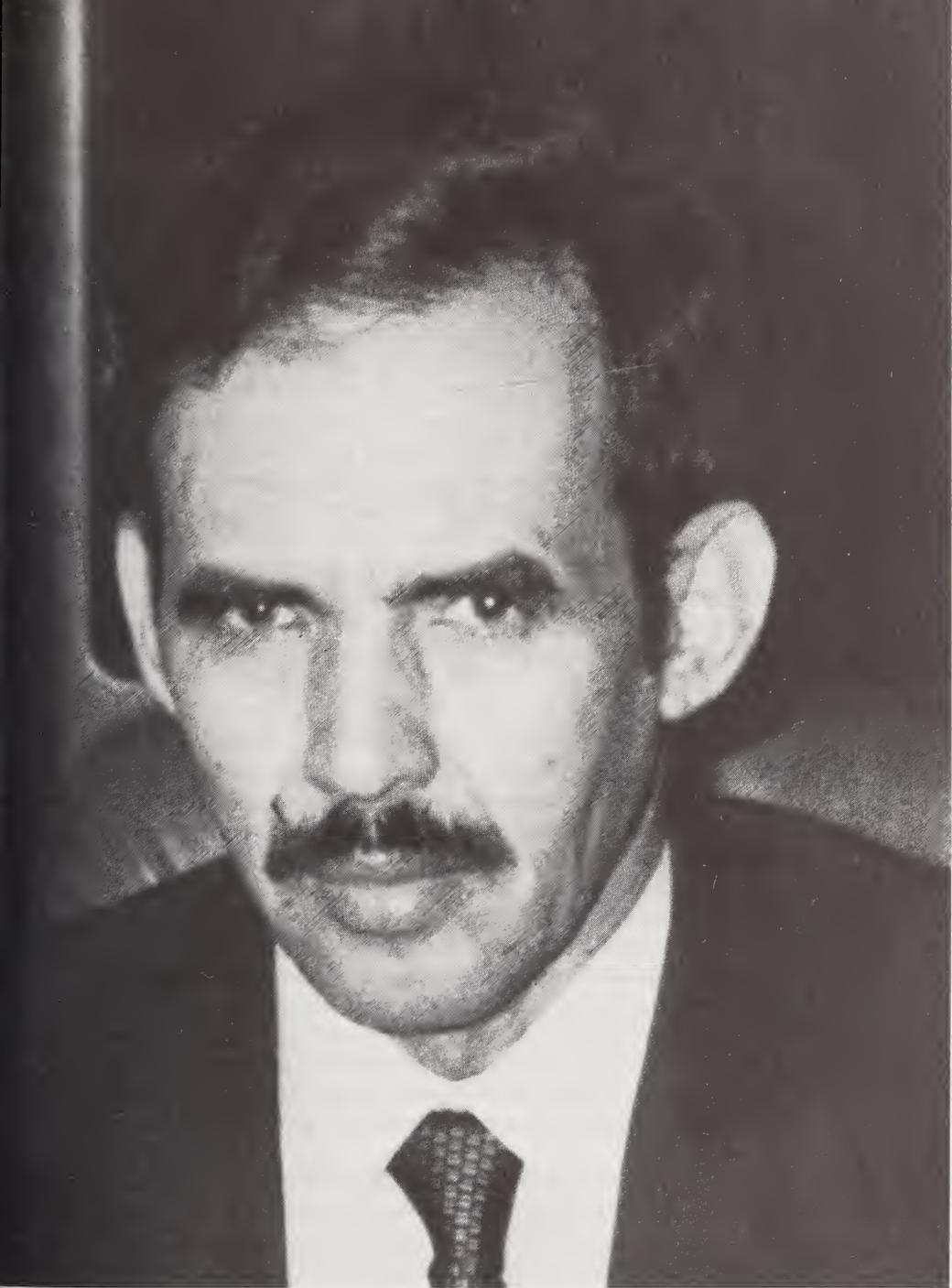
at best correct and represented little more than Taya's attempt to appease his more formidable neighbors.

Mauritania's principal foreign policy objective in the mid-1980s has been to ensure its own territorial integrity. Translated into diplomacy, this has meant pursuing a policy of strict neutrality in the Western Sahara dispute, improving relations with Morocco and Algeria, and seeking guarantees of support from France should ties with Mauritania's northern neighbors seriously deteriorate. Taya's efforts in that area have had mixed results. Although Taya insisted that Mauritania would remain neutral in the conflict over the Western Sahara, Mauritania faced a mounting threat of greater involvement because the combatants themselves continued to encroach on Mauritanian territory. As the Moroccans pushed southward in the Western Sahara behind their highly effective network of sand walls (berms—see Glossary) to within a few kilometers of the Mauritanian border, Mauritanian armed forces were placed in the position of confronting either well-equipped Moroccan troops pursuing Polisario guerrillas, or Polisario commando teams crossing into and perhaps attacking the berms from Mauritanian territory. In either case, Mauritania would probably be the loser.

Taya has also sought to improve ties with other countries to secure trading partners or find new investors. Mauritania's principal benefactors have been Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and France. The list of donors also includes Japan, Iraq, Italy, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), Romania, the United States, the Persian Gulf states, and China (see Balance of Payments, Debt, and Foreign Assistance, ch. 3).

### **Relations with France**

Most of Mauritania's developmental assistance in the 1980s was provided by France, which was also the major supplier of private direct investment. Bilateral accords signed with France in 1961 provided for economic, financial, technical, cultural, and military cooperation and aid. Although Mauritania opposed France on Algerian independence, nuclear testing in the Sahara, and French arms sales to South Africa, ties remained cordial through the Daddah term. French citizens worked in Mauritania as technical assistants in the government, administrators, teachers, and judges. Daddah frequently traveled to France, and French development aid flowed to Mauritania. The level of French involvement rose markedly following the outbreak of hostilities in the Western Sahara. Between 1976 and 1979, when Mauritania unilaterally declared peace and withdrew from combat, French aircraft provided air



*Colonel Maaouiya Ould Sid 'Ahmed Taya  
Courtesy Embassy of Mauritania, Washington*

support for Mauritanian troops fighting Polisario forces, and French paratroops were stationed at Nouadhibou.

Activity by Mauritanian dissidents in France, together with Mauritania's gradual policy shift toward the Polisario, resulted in a growing coolness toward Paris. In May 1979, Mauritania asked France to remove its troops from Nouadhibou. France continued to provide a high level of financial aid, although less than requested by the Haidalla government, and this curtailment further strained ties. Following alleged accusations of Moroccan support of a coup attempt in March 1981, Haidalla again turned to France to obtain guarantees of Mauritania's territorial integrity. French president Georges Pompidou and Haidalla concluded an accord in 1981, as Morocco threatened to carry the struggle against Polisario guerrillas into Mauritanian territory. As Morocco's advancing sand walls increasingly obligated Polisario guerrillas to use Mauritania as a staging area, President Haidalla and, later, President Taya sought and received guarantees of French support in August 1984 and June 1987.

### **Relations with Morocco**

Prior to the December 1984 coup that brought Taya to power, the Mauritanian-Moroccan cooperation agency stated that relations between the two countries were on the mend in spite of alleged Moroccan complicity in a 1981 coup attempt and Mauritania's subsequent turn toward Algeria (see *Consolidation of Power*, ch. 1). Representatives from both sides initiated a series of low-level contacts that led to a resumption of diplomatic ties in April 1985. For Mauritania, the détente with Morocco promised to end the threat of Moroccan incursions, and it also removed the threat of Moroccan support for opposition groups formed during the Haidalla presidency. Through the agreement with Mauritania, Morocco sought to tighten its control over the Western Sahara by denying the Polisario one more avenue for infiltrating guerrillas into the disputed territory.

Relations between Morocco and Mauritania continued to improve through 1986, reflecting President Taya's pragmatic, if unstated, view that only a Moroccan victory over the Polisario would end the guerrilla war in the Western Sahara. Taya made his first visit to Morocco in October 1985 (prior to visits to Algeria and Tunisia) in the wake of Moroccan claims that Polisario guerrillas were again traversing Mauritanian territory. The completion of a sixth berm just north of Mauritania's crucial rail link along the border with the Western Sahara, between Nouadhibou and the iron ore mines, complicated relations between Mauritania and Morocco.

Polisario guerrillas in mid-1987 had to traverse Mauritanian territory to enter the Western Sahara, a situation that invited Morocco's accusations of Mauritanian complicity. Moreover, any engagements near the sixth berm would threaten to spill over into Mauritania and jeopardize the rail link.

### **Relations with Other States of the Maghrib**

Focusing on internal affairs prior to independence, Mauritania was reluctant to participate in the Common Saharan States Organization proposed by France in 1957, and the organization collapsed when Algeria gained its independence. From the mid-1970s, Mauritania's ties with Libya and, to a greater extent, Algeria were inextricably linked to the Western Sahara conflict and the larger confrontation between Algeria and Morocco. As relations with Morocco cooled following Mauritania's unilateral withdrawal from the conflict, ties with Algeria improved. Within days after the March 1981 coup attempt, Algeria dispatched military reinforcements to Nouakchott. In December 1983, Algeria joined Mauritania and Tunisia in pledging to negotiate conflicts according to the terms of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship. Algeria also refurbished the oil refinery at Nouadhibou in 1982, and again in 1987, after the refinery had been shut down for several years for lack of adequate maintenance.

Since the 1984 coup that brought Taya to power, Mauritania has been scrupulous in its efforts to balance its contacts with Algeria and Morocco. A visit to one capital by a Mauritanian diplomat is quickly followed by a visit to the other. When the sixth berm was completed in May 1987, bringing Moroccan troops to within a few kilometers of Mauritanian territory, Algeria offered to send troops to Nouadhibou, ostensibly to discourage hot-pursuit raids by Moroccan armed forces. Taya refused the offer, but at the same time he accorded Algeria special fishing rights without the joint participation required of other national fleets fishing Mauritania's waters.

Libya's relations with Mauritania were generally confrontational. On several occasions, Libya has expressed its intention of absorbing Mauritania into an Islamic federation, and Libya allegedly backed a coup attempt in Mauritania in December 1980. The Oujda Agreement between Morocco and Libya, signed in 1984, was viewed as a serious threat in Mauritania that was removed only when the agreement collapsed in 1986. Although Mauritania has repeatedly professed neutrality in the Western Sahara, Taya's unwillingness to lend support to the Polisario was interpreted by Libya as a pro-Moroccan stance. In 1987 Taya suggested that Libya was

supporting efforts by black separatists in Mauritania to destabilize his government and possibly exact a modicum of revenge against King Hassan II of Morocco, Libya's erstwhile ally.

### **Relations with Arab States**

In 1987 Mauritania had generally cordial relations with the Arab states of the Middle East, which have provided it with substantial amounts of economic aid. Since the mid-1970s, Mauritania has had especially close ties with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq. Kuwait has provided substantial amounts of food and medicines. Iraq has funded the construction of health and sanitation facilities, schools, and thermal generating stations and has also invested in local mining, fishing, and gypsum industries. Both Saudi Arabia and Iraq—until Iraq became mired in the Iran-Iraq War beginning in 1980—have provided direct budgetary subsidies to the Mauritanian government. In return, Mauritania has lent moral support to Iraq; and in June 1987, following a visit to Nouakchott by a representative of the Kuwaiti government, Taya severed diplomatic relations with Iran to protest its supposed unwillingness to negotiate a settlement in the Iran-Iraq War. (At the same time, Taya, unlike many of his African counterparts, has steadfastly refused to accuse Iran of supporting radical Islamic fundamentalism in his country, presumably because of his policy of remaining on good terms with all Middle Eastern states.)

### **Relations with Communist States**

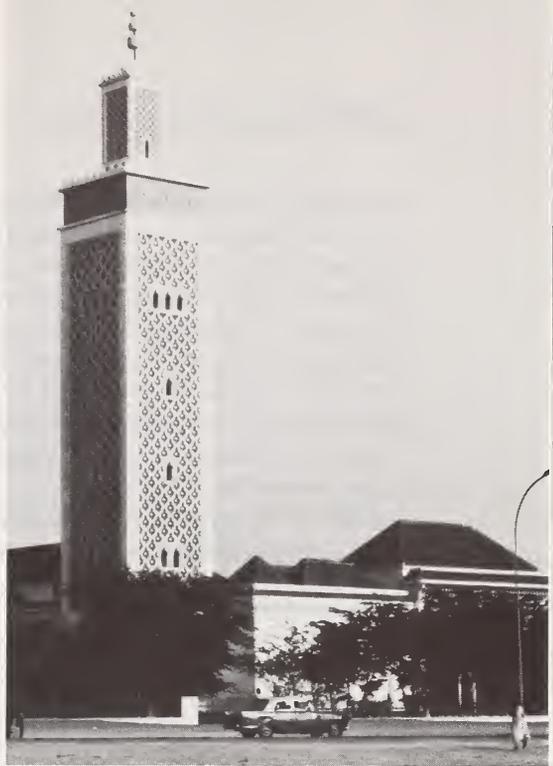
In 1987 Mauritania's diplomatic relations with China, first established in 1964, remained close. With one exception, every Mauritanian president has visited China. Taya's six-day visit, his first visit as Mauritanian head of state, took place in February 1986 and was followed by China's promises of increased aid. In addition to building a deep-water port for Nouakchott, China provided food, financial aid, and technical assistance in health care and agriculture. China also constructed a sports complex in the capital.

Mauritania established relations with the Soviet Union in 1965. In the mid-1980s, commercial ties between the two states remained negligible, as did commercial agreements with the Soviet Union's East European allies. Mauritania also maintained diplomatic relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea).

### **Relations with the West**

Relations with the United States have never been close. The United States recognized Mauritanian independence when it was

*Saudi-financed mosque  
in Nouakchott  
Courtesy Larry Barrie*



proclaimed in November 1960, but the first two ambassadors shared accreditation with Senegal and resided in Dakar. A United States embassy opened in July 1962 in Nouakchott and was headed by a chargé d'affaires. Only in 1972 were resident ambassadors exchanged.

Since the onset of the drought in the mid-1970s, Mauritania has cultivated ties with Western Europe and Eastern Europe as possible sources of aid and investment. Mauritania's ties with Spain, which until 1975 were dominated by the fate of the Western Sahara, remained cordial in spite of repeated violations of Mauritania's fishing regulations by Spanish boats. The two countries have formed a joint economic and technical cooperation commission, a move reflecting the importance Spain gave to its aid and cooperation program with Mauritania.

### **Relations with Other African States**

In the years following independence, Mauritania's principal friend in sub-Saharan Africa was Senegal, although the two countries have espoused different strategies for development. The growing split between blacks and Maures in Mauritania has, however, affected ties with Senegal, which sees itself as championing the rights of Mauritania's black minority. Under Taya, relations between the two countries were correct, even though each accused the other of harboring exiled dissidents. In May 1987, Senegal extradited

Captain Moulaye Asham Ould Ashen, a former black member of the Haidalla government accused of corruption, but only after veiled threats from Nouakchott that failure to do so would result in Mauritania's allowing Senegalese dissidents a platform from which to speak out against the government of President Abdou Diouf. At the same time, Senegal and Mauritania have cooperated successfully with Mali under the Senegal River Development Office (Organisation pour la Mise en Valeur du Fleuve Sénégal—OMVS), which was formed in 1972 as a flood control, irrigation, and agricultural development project.

Since Mauritania negotiated a boundary dispute with Mali in 1963, ties between the two countries have been most cordial. Mali and Mauritania have cooperated on several development projects, such as the OMVS and a plan to improve roads between Nouakchott and Bamako. This cooperation somewhat lessened Mali's dependence on Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. Although relations were warm with other black African states, since 1965 the orientation of Mauritania's foreign policy has been northward.

### **International Organizations**

Mauritania is a member of the United Nations. It is represented in the International Labour Organisation, the World Health Organization, the International Telecommunication Union, and the Intergovernmental Consultative Organization on Maritime Navigation. In Africa, Mauritania is a member of the OAU and, at the regional level, the Economic Community of West Africa (Communauté Economique de l'Afrique Occidentale—CEAO), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Nonaggression and Mutual Assistance and Defense Accord (a mutual defense accord among several francophone states of West Africa). Mauritania also belongs to the Arab League.

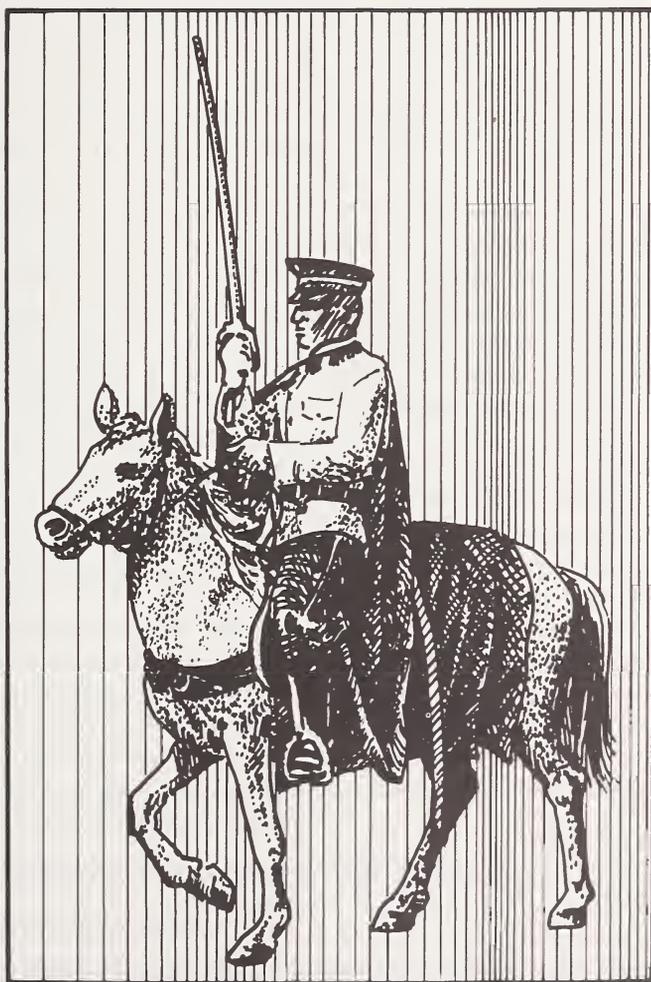
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Writing on Mauritania, so rich for the medieval and precolonial periods when Mauritania served as a cultural and economic link between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, had shrunk by the postindependence period, when a constellation of factors relegated Mauritania to a relatively minor role in West Africa. Moreover, drought, war, and domestic security concerns have virtually eliminated the discretionary funds the government might otherwise have spent for publishing documentary materials pertaining to contemporary Mauritanian government and politics. The principal sources for this chapter included the earlier version of

*Mauritania: A Country Study*; a similar but more detailed study entitled *Introduction à la Mauritanie* compiled by the Centre de Recherches et d'Etudes sur les Sociétés Méditerranéennes (CRESM) and the Centre d'Etudes d'Afrique Noire and published by the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS); and J.C. Arnaud's *Les institutions politiques de la Mauritanie*. Contemporary sources included *Africa South of the Sahara* published by Europa; *Africa Contemporary Record*; *Chaab*, Mauritania's French-language daily newspaper; the *Country Reports* and *Quarterly Economic Reviews* published by the Economist Intelligence Unit; and the following news magazines: *Jeune Afrique*, *Africa Research Bulletin*, *Africa Confidential*, and *Marchés tropicaux et Méditerranéens*. (For further information and complete citations, see Bibliography.)



## Chapter 5. National Security



*Mounted color guard*

SINCE GAINING INDEPENDENCE in 1960, Mauritania has faced a number of serious external and internal threats. Until 1969 the majority of Arab states refused to recognize Mauritania's sovereignty and supported Morocco's irredentist claims to the entire nation. Only in 1969 did Morocco extend official recognition to the Nouakchott government. Although the two countries signed a treaty of friendship the following year, Mauritanian leaders have treated their stronger neighbor to the north with caution, relying heavily on French protection. The dispute over sovereignty of the Spanish Sahara in the early 1970s raised further security problems. Negotiations among Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, and Spain failed to resolve the issue, and in 1976 war erupted in the area known as the Western Sahara. As that conflict dragged on, Mauritania's economy faltered and antigovernment opposition groups emerged, threatening the stability of the military regime that replaced Moktar Ould Daddah's civilian government in July 1978. Subsequently, internal coups and innumerable cabinet shuffles plagued the government from 1978 through 1984 when the regime of Colonel Maaouiya Ould Sid Ahmed Ould Taya came to power.

In 1987 government security forces, consisting of military, paramilitary, and police units, were small and equipped only for maintaining internal security. Military forces under the Ministry of Defense included an army, navy, air force, and three paramilitary units: the Nomad Security Guard (or Camel Corps) under the jurisdiction of the army, the small Border Guard, and the National Gendarmerie. The Ministry of Interior, Information, and Telecommunications controlled the police and the National Guard, the Customs Corps, and the Presidential Guard. Mauritania's various heads of state in turn reorganized the security forces and shuffled personnel to facilitate troop deployment and to prevent any one individual or group from acquiring too much power. As a result, force readiness and strength suffered.

## **External Security Perceptions and Policies**

### **War in the Western Sahara**

From the 1960s through 1987, Mauritania's foreign policy was directed toward protecting the country's national sovereignty (see Foreign Relations, ch. 4). Mauritania at first sought and received French support to prevent Morocco from attempting to annex the

## *Mauritania: A Country Study*

country. Then, after Morocco recognized Mauritanian sovereignty, Mauritania distanced itself from France and cultivated ties with various Arab countries, including Algeria and Morocco, in hopes of avoiding regional disputes.

Yet by 1976, Mauritania was again involved in regional conflict. Along with Morocco, Mauritania, as party to the Madrid Agreements, claimed a portion of the Spanish Sahara (now generally called Western Sahara). As the struggle of the Polisario (see Glossary) for sovereignty in the Western Sahara escalated, it became clear that Mauritania's armed forces were incapable of either asserting its territorial claims in the Western Sahara or defending its own territory. Mauritania sought assistance from France and Morocco in its struggle to defend itself against Polisario guerrillas. After relinquishing its claims in the Western Sahara in 1978, Mauritania again sought foreign military support from France and also Morocco (see Consolidation of Power, ch. 1).

As the Western Sahara war continued into the mid-1980s, Moroccan advances forced Polisario guerrillas into Mauritanian territory. In response, Mauritania placed troops along its northern border. In 1987, when Mauritania found itself unable to defend its 2,500-kilometer border with the Western Sahara, the country feared it would be dragged back into a conflict from which it had extricated itself nine years earlier.

### **Regional Security Concerns**

Since independence, Mauritania has been confronted with several potential challenges to its national security. Problems in addition to the Western Sahara war have included Moroccan irredentist claims, Senegalese meddling in racial disputes, and Libyan interference.

#### ***Morocco***

Moroccan threats to Mauritania originated in the seventeenth century and continued into the twentieth century. In 1956 and 1957, Mauritanian and Moroccan members of the Army of Liberation (*Armée de Libération—AL*), the military wing of the Mauritanian National Liberation Front headquartered in Morocco, raided Mauritania's northern region. With no military forces of its own to defend the frontiers, the preindependence transition government called on France for aid. In February 1958, a joint Franco-Spanish land-air operation destroyed the AL in the Spanish Sahara and stopped the southward infiltration of Moroccan-supported guerrillas.

In the 1960s, Morocco continued to support irredentist groups in Mauritania, especially the Reguibat Maures of the far north,



*Polisario troops at Tindouf, Algeria  
Courtesy Theresa Smith*

who claimed allegiance to the king of Morocco. Following the revolt of the Reguibat Maures in 1962-63, the French again sent troops to the troubled area. Threats from the north subsided for a short time when, in 1969, Morocco officially recognized Mauritania.

Soon after, Mauritania's concerns about Morocco revived when Mauritania had to call on Moroccan troops for defense against Polisario guerrilla attacks. The stationing of Moroccan soldiers inside Mauritania gave rise to suspicion that in providing military aid, Morocco was trying to resuscitate its old idea of a Greater Morocco (see fig. 3). In addition, the Mauritanian military (15,000 to 17,000 troops) resented its role as a back-up force to the Moroccan troops (estimated at 10,000) garrisoned in Mauritania. At the same time, Mauritania feared that if it abandoned its claims to Tiris al Gharbiyya (that part of the Western Sahara it claimed), Moroccan troops would immediately occupy it, removing the buffer territory insulating Mauritania from Morocco.

In 1979 that fear was confirmed when King Hassan II annexed Tiris al Gharbiyya several days after Mauritania's August 5 peace treaty with the Polisario. Consequently the government of Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla again sought French support. French president Valery Giscard d'Estaing ordered a paratroop unit to Nouadhibou to defend Mauritania against a possible Moroccan invasion and to prevent the Polisario from using the nearby

territory as a rear base for attacking Moroccan armed forces in the Western Sahara (see Foreign Military Assistance, this ch.). Mauritania expelled several Moroccan diplomats and withdrew the passports of pro-Moroccan politicians.

In 1980, as relations worsened between the two countries, Nouakchott renounced the Mauritanian-Moroccan defense pact and ordered Morocco to withdraw its troops from Mauritanian territory. Morocco initially refused the evacuation order and tried to make the removal of its last garrison at Bir Mogreïn in northern Mauritania contingent on the withdrawal of Mauritanian forces from La Guera in the Western Sahara (see fig. 11). Mauritania refused this request because it believed that continued administration of La Guera, with easy access to the iron ore port at Nouadhibou, was vital for security. The government claimed that a Moroccan presence only five kilometers from the port would invite Polisario attacks inside Mauritania and give King Hassan a potential stranglehold over the Mauritanian economy.

The two countries broke off relations in March 1981 when Mauritania accused Morocco of instigating a coup to establish a pro-Moroccan government in Nouakchott. In 1983 relations deteriorated further when Mauritania officially recognized the government-in-exile established by the Polisario, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).

By 1983 Haidalla had aligned himself with leftist factions within the ruling Military Committee for National Salvation (Comité Militaire de Salut National—CMSN) and strengthened relations with Algeria, which supported the Polisario. Subsequently, and against the advice and wishes of a majority in the CMSN, in 1984 Haidalla recognized the SADR. Mauritania's supportive stance toward the Polisario increasingly angered Hassan, who accused Mauritania of harboring Polisario troops.

Observers noted, however, that the Polisario also maintained bases in southern Morocco and had the support of certain nomadic tribes in the area of the Draa River. Thus, it was clear that the movement received support from various sectors of the population on both sides of the border, irrespective of governments.

Mauritania's foreign relations changed when the coup led by the Mauritanian military in December 1984 brought Taya to power. Taya distanced Mauritania from the Polisario, while continuing to recognize its rights to self-determination. Concurrently, Taya improved Mauritania's relations with Morocco and reestablished diplomatic ties in April 1985.

Nevertheless, the Nouakchott government continued to fear that Morocco would violate Mauritania's borders in pursuit of Polisario

guerrillas. In May 1987, Morocco finished construction of a sixth berm (see Glossary) in the Western Sahara along Mauritania's northern border. The system of berms built along the Western Sahara's eastern and southern borders and manned by Moroccan troops effectively insulated the entire territory and forced the Polisario onto Mauritanian soil. This threat pushed the CMSN to station nearly two-thirds of Mauritania's military along the northwestern borders and to seek increased French military aid.

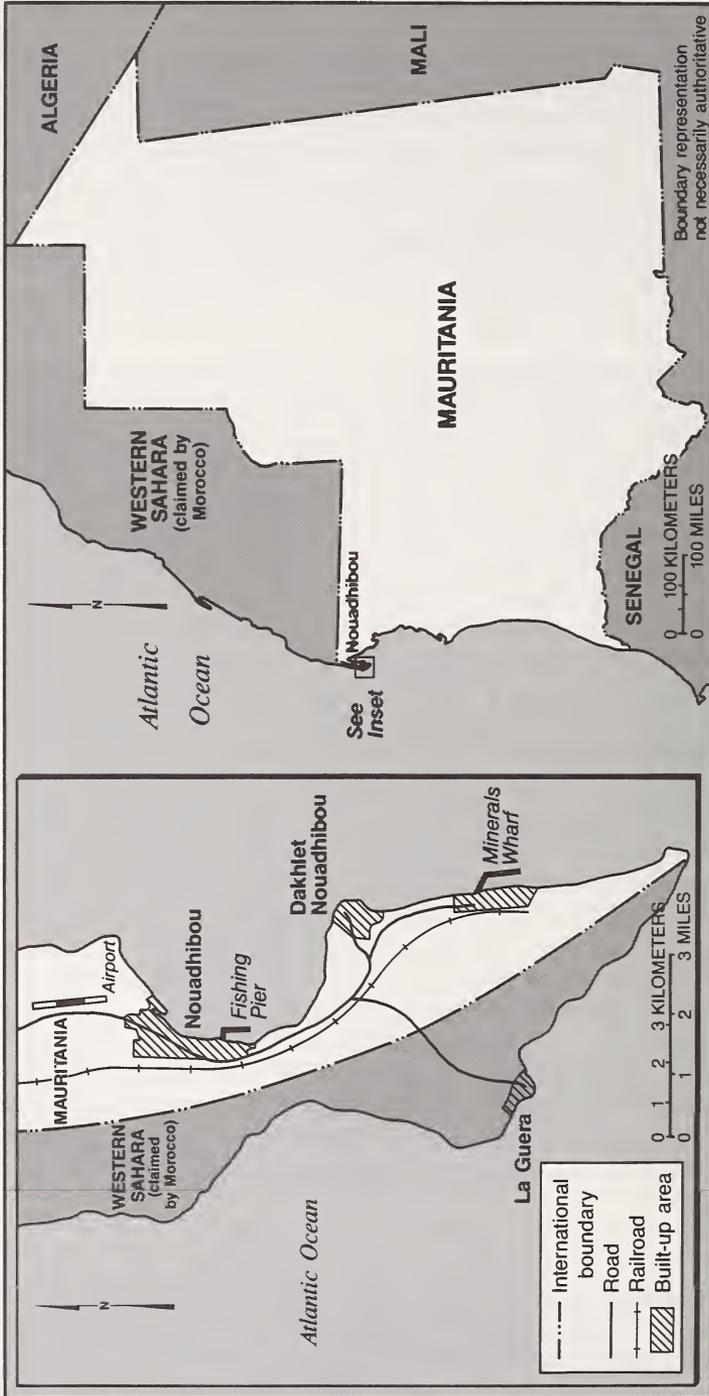
### *Senegal*

As of 1987, Senegal posed no threat to Mauritania's national security. Nevertheless, Senegal has caused Nouakchott concern by exploiting Mauritania's ethnic cleavages for its own interests. Léopold Senghor, president of Senegal from 1960 to 1981, feared the prospect of a radical Mauritanian government that could result if Mauritania were drawn into an Algerian-Libyan orbit. In order to pressure Mauritania into making security-related concessions favorable to Senegal, Senghor threatened to demand self-determination for southern Mauritania's black Africans if there was no change in Maure domination in the Nouakchott government. He also directed a well-coordinated press campaign that sought to publicize the racial problems between the black and Maure populations (see *Ethnic Groups and Languages*, ch. 2).

Mauritania's relations with Senegal improved when Abdou Diouf, who did not expect Mauritania to succumb to radical influence instigated by Algeria and Libya, replaced Senghor as president in 1981. Relations further improved when, after the March 16, 1981, pro-Moroccan coup attempt in Nouakchott, Diouf expelled Mauritanian opposition group members from Senegal. Although members of opposition groups continued to take refuge in Dakar, the Senegalese government did not formally offer asylum to them, and in May 1987, Senegal extradited Captain Moulaye Asham Ould Ashen, a former member of the CMSN, wanted on embezzling charges. Nevertheless, Senegal had a continuing interest in supporting a biracial Mauritania as a buffer state between its frontiers and what it viewed as an expansionist Arab Maghrib (see Glossary).

### *Libya*

Libyan intervention in Mauritania's affairs has been more direct than Senegalese intervention. On December 26, 1980, the Mauritanian government uncovered what appears to have been a Libyan-backed plot to overthrow the government, after which Libya was to have merged Mauritania, the Western Sahara, and Libya into



Source: Based on information from Charles Toupet (ed.), *Atlas de la République Islamique de Mauritanie*, Paris, 1977, 54.

Figure 11. Nouadhibou and Vicinity, 1987



*Mauritanian troops*

a single state. In response, the government arrested five Mauritians, expelled three Libyan diplomats, and closed the Libyan cultural center.

In 1984 Mauritania temporarily broke off relations with Libya after accusing Tripoli of financing student movements seeking to destabilize the government. Relations were reestablished May 23, 1985. Three months later, Libya threatened the new relationship when it deported 600 to 1,000 Mauritanian nationals as part of a general deportation of all foreign workers. President Taya's only response was a formal protest; otherwise, the official Mauritanian press played down the whole affair in order to keep their newly reestablished ties friendly.

## **The Development of the Armed Forces**

### **The Preindependence Period**

The Mauritanian armed forces were developed by the French colonial army and used in military ventures throughout the French Empire. In recognition of the major contributions of African troops to the French war effort during the two world wars, the French government eliminated many of the distinctions between French and African troops. Pensions and allowances were granted to veterans in 1949, and conscripted military labor was abolished in 1950. By 1955 discrimination was officially eliminated by opening all military ranks to Africans. After 1956 officer training for Africans

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was provided at military preparatory schools located in Africa and, after 1958, at France's Military Academy of St. Cyr.

An Africanized military was especially important in Mauritania, where the military governed the colony into the 1920s and in certain *cercles*, or administrative subdivisions, up to independence. On the one hand, Mauritanian veterans, imbued with an esprit de corps, a more cosmopolitan view of the world, and a growing self-interest, returned home as agents of modernization and political development. On the other hand, the French practice of integrating all Africans into the French army inhibited the development of a strictly territorial or national army. Mauritanians, along with other Africans, served in France, Indochina, Senegal, or Madagascar and operated under French statutes, conditions of service, and recruitment policies. Nevertheless, the Africanization program begun in the early 1950s gave Mauritania a small core of experienced officers on which to build its military forces.

### **The Independence Period and the French Military Legacy**

In the 1950s and 1960s, France signed defense treaties with many of the new African states. Its bilateral treaty with Mauritania provided for permanent base facilities for up to 3,000 French troops in Mauritania to support French interests in Algeria and to deter Morocco's irredentist claims. The three-part agreement provided for the transfer of men, units, equipment, and installations from France to form the basis of Mauritania's army; it provided military training programs and supplies; and it promised assistance by French personnel in the external and internal defense of the country. Mauritania controlled both external defense and internal security; France would assist if requested.

According to the agreement, Mauritanian nationals serving with the French army could either return to their country to form the nucleus of the new army or remain in the French army with permission of the Mauritanian government. In both cases, they retained pension rights. In addition, the colonial gendarmerie was transferred in toto to the new government. The army and the gendarmerie were equipped at no charge by France, and France offered sophisticated and expensive logistical support to the Mauritanian Army. In return, Mauritania agreed to purchase all of its military equipment from France. Although the French retained the air base at Atar and units of the army remained at Port-Etienne (present-day Nouadhibou) and Fort Trinquet (present-day Bir Moghreïn), Mauritania gained control of all other military installations in the country.

French commissioned officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) filled out the command cadres and organized intensive training programs for Mauritanian recruits. In addition, France agreed to train a number of Mauritanian officers at French military academies at French expense (see *Manpower and Training*, this ch.). In return, Mauritania agreed not to send trainees to any other country. To manage the training and organization of the new army and to coordinate the technical assistance program, the French military established an aid office in Nouakchott. At the same time, Mauritania and France also signed two other defense-related accords. The first was the Complementary Agreement on Raw Materials and Strategic Elements, whereby Mauritania granted priority of the sale of liquid or gaseous hydrocarbons, uranium, thorium, lithium, beryllium, and helium to France. The second was the Status of Forces Agreement, which covered judicial treatment of the several thousand French troops stationed in Mauritania.

France continued its military assistance and defense cooperation throughout the 1960s; meanwhile, it reduced its military presence to a handful of officers and NCOs in training programs. By 1966 the last French troops had withdrawn from Mauritania and transferred their bases to the Mauritanian armed forces. At the same time, more Mauritians attended advance officer training courses in France.

The replacement of French troops stationed in Africa with intervention forces stationed in France was an integral part of the reorganization of French defense policy started in 1959 under General Charles de Gaulle and followed by the successive governments of the French Fifth Republic. Under this new defense policy, the French deemed military bases of any considerable size (as well as transit facilities, technical support, and refueling stations) too much of a political risk in independent Africa.

## **The Armed Forces**

### **Organization and Strength**

In 1987 the armed forces were organized under the president, who also served as minister of defense and oversaw all aspects of the military. Lieutenant Colonel Diallo Mohamed was second in command. Military headquarters staff was divided into offices handling personnel, intelligence, training and operations, and logistics. Headquarters staff also directed the signals, equipment, and quartermaster corps. The army was organized into five geographic regions (a sixth region had been reapportioned among the remaining five regions) and two at-large sectors, located in Mbeïrika and Kaédi (see fig. 12).

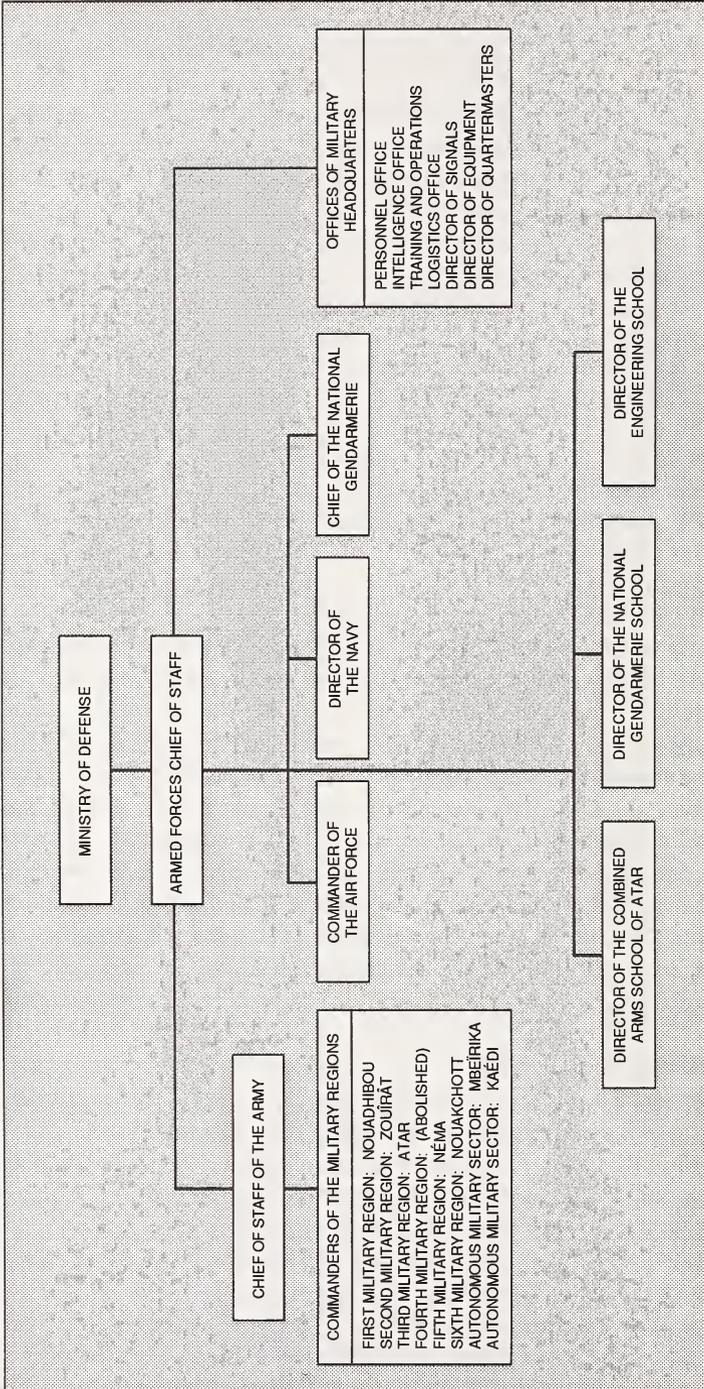


Figure 12. Organization of National Security Forces, 1987

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the chief task of the Mauritanian military had been internal control. When French forces departed in 1966, Mauritanian armed forces numbered approximately 1,000 men (900 in the army and 100 in the fledgling air force). By 1971 they had grown 50 percent to over 1,500 men (army 1,444; air force, 100; and navy, 30). Daddah deliberately kept the armed forces small, however, to decrease the possibility of a military coup, and he relied on French military assistance to meet external threats.

With the advent of the Western Sahara war, the government raised troop strength and improved training. The armed forces expanded from 3,000 men at the beginning of 1976 to 12,000 by the beginning of 1977, and further expanded to between 15,000 and 17,000 at the beginning of 1978. To train staff officers, the government opened a combined services college at Atar in November 1976. Haidalla also introduced a military service program called the National Civic Service to assist the regular military forces. Restricted to Mauritanian People's Party (Parti du Peuple Mauritanienne—PPM) members at least eighteen years old, the program provided military training and political education for two half-days each week. The newly trained servicemen were to help with civil defense, intelligence, and press relations. This scheme failed, however, because Mauritians were disillusioned with the war and viewed war-related efforts with skepticism and apathy.

Following the cease-fire with Polisario forces, Mauritanian armed forces strength was halved, decreasing from 17,000 in July 1978 to 9,450 in early 1979. The forces were further reduced to 7,970 by July 1980. The CMSN reorganized the army of 7,500 soldiers into one infantry battalion, one artillery battalion, two armored car squadrons, one anti-aircraft battery, and one engineering company. The navy, on the other hand, increased the number of navy personnel to 320 and acquired two new patrol craft, bringing the total to thirteen. Paramilitary forces decreased in size from 6,000 to 2,750.

Attempted coups in 1981, 1982, and 1983, followed by defections, executions, and arrests of officers, devastated the morale of the armed forces. To add to their difficulties, the underequipped forces were charged with guarding the economically crucial iron mines of Zouïrât, the port facilities at Nouadhibou, and the rail line between them. This difficult task, which exposed troops to attacks by well-equipped Polisario guerrillas, further eroded the forces' morale.

### *The Army*

Since its formation, the Mauritanian Army has undergone several reorganizations. It was created in October 1961 as the First Infantry

Battalion with its headquarters in Rosso. Units of the battalion were stationed in Atar, Akjoujt, Néma, 'Ayoûn el 'Atroûs, and Nouakchott. The many problems of command, flexibility, and mobility led to a reorganization in 1962 that provided for a national command in Nouakchott and separate functional, rather than territorial, units. In 1987 the army consisted of one infantry battalion, two armored car squadrons, one parachute-commando company, three reconnaissance squadrons, two artillery batteries, one airborne company, one engineering corps, and one antiaircraft battery. The Camel Corps, considered a paramilitary unit although under the jurisdiction of the army, numbered 100 and patrolled the borders. The highest ranking officer in the army was a colonel (see fig. 13). Although the army was the primary defender of Mauritanian security, it was underequipped and undertrained, leaving Mauritania vulnerable (see table 3, Appendix).

### *The Navy*

The Mauritanian Navy was created on January 25, 1966, after the extension of Mauritania's territorial waters from twelve to thirty nautical miles. By 1972 the navy had one small patrol gunboat and two small patrol craft that performed port control and customs duties. In 1987 the navy had thirteen boats. Of these boats, only eight were seaworthy, and the navy could send only two vessels out to open water at a time (see table 4, Appendix). Mauritania's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) extended 200 nautical miles out from the coast, but effective coastal surveillance was impossible because the navy's vessels were not able to control Mauritania's waters. Nouadhibou housed the major naval base; Nouakchott housed a secondary base.

At the navy's twentieth anniversary celebrations in 1986, the armed forces chief of staff announced that it would be reorganized to improve efficiency. In 1987 observers believed that the reorganized navy would consist of a joint operational command, with the navy as the senior service, teamed up with the air force, the Department of Fisheries, and the Customs Corps. The highest ranking officer in the navy was a colonel.

### *The Air Force*

The Mauritanian Air Force (which played only a minor role in the Western Sahara conflict) numbered 150 men in 1987, and its combat capabilities were minimal (see table 5, Appendix). The highest ranking officer was a colonel. Because the air force lacked defensive capabilities, French troops from neighboring Senegal assisted with aerial surveillance and bombing raids during the

Western Sahara war. At any one time, most aircraft were grounded because of mechanical failure, lack of spare parts, and general maintenance problems. Air strips were located at 'Ayoûn el 'Atrouïs, Akjoujt, Atar, Fdèrik, Bir Moghreïn, Kaédi, Kiffa, Nouadhibou, Nouakchott, and Rosso.

### **Manpower and Military Training Schools**

Although the government introduced conscription for a two-year period of service in 1962, by 1987 the number of volunteers surpassed the needs of the armed forces. Volunteers had to be sixteen years of age, unmarried, and of Mauritanian nationality. Periods of enlistment ranged from two to five years. With military pay well above the national average income and with educational opportunities available, young Mauritanian males—women did not serve in the armed forces—of all ethnic groups volunteered for military service. After service all veterans were, in effect, reservists, subject to recall in the event of a national emergency.

The armed forces, from their inception, mirrored the ethnic cleavages of the larger society. Thus, in 1987 officers still came primarily from the north, whereas enlisted men came from the black populations in the south. This practice, which gave the appearance of racism, did little to foster unity among the armed forces and further lowered morale.

With aid from France, the government established the Combined Arms School of Atar (*Ecole Militaire Interarmes d'Atar—EMIA*) in 1976 to train officers and NCOs. The future officers followed a two-year program, and NCOs followed a one-year program. Twenty French military advisers, twelve of whom were officers, served as technical military assistants. Working with Mauritanian counterparts, they coordinated training and supervised students. Courses included firearms, military weapons and tactics, engineering, signals, topography, and vehicle maintenance. Since 1985 France had sponsored trips for second-year graduates to various military installations and schools in St. Cyr, Coëtquidan, Fontainebleau, and Paris.

Approximately 100 members of the armed forces trained in French military academies each year. The Military Academy of St. Cyr had a comprehensive two-year course for francophone Africans. The National Training Center at Montlouis in the Pyrenees Mountains in southwestern France conducted commando training, and the Montpellier Infantry Instruction School offered training for motorized infantry troops. The Coëtquidan Military School trained officers.

COMMISSIONED OFFICERS						
MAURITANIA RANK	SOUS-LIEUTENANT	LIEUTENANT	CAPITAINE	COMMANDANT	LIEUTENANT COLONEL	COLONEL
ARMY, AIR FORCE, AND NAVY						
	1 2D LIEUTENANT	1ST LIEUTENANT	CAPTAIN	MAJOR	LIEUTENANT COLONEL	COLONEL
U.S. RANK TITLES	ENSIGN	LIEUTENANT JUNIOR GRADE	LIEUTENANT	LIEUTENANT COMMANDER	COMMANDER	CAPTAIN

ENLISTED PERSONNEL						
MAURITANIA RANK	CAPORAL	CAPORAL-CHEF	SERGEANT	SERGEANT-CHEF	ADJUDANT	ADJUDANT-CHEF
ARMY, AIR FORCE, AND NAVY	INSIGNIA NOT KNOWN	INSIGNIA NOT KNOWN				
	1 CORPORAL SERGEANT	SERGEANT	STAFF SERGEANT	SERGEANT 1ST CLASS	FIRST SERGEANT	COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR
U.S. RANK TITLES	PETTY OFFICER 3D CLASS	PETTY OFFICER 2D CLASS	PETTY OFFICER 1ST CLASS	CHIEF PETTY OFFICER	SENIOR CHIEF PETTY OFFICER	CHIEF MASTER SERGEANT
	2 PETY OFFICER 3D CLASS	PETTY OFFICER 2D CLASS	PETTY OFFICER 1ST CLASS	CHIEF PETTY OFFICER	SENIOR CHIEF PETTY OFFICER	FLEET FORCE MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER

NOTE. <sup>1</sup> Army and Air Force. <sup>2</sup> Navy.

Figure 13. Military Ranks and Insignia, 1987

Although the Mauritanian Naval College at Nouadhibou trained some Mauritians, for the most part the navy trained abroad. Libya and the United States each trained some Mauritians, but the majority of navy personnel trained in France at the Toulon Navy School, which accepted four non-French students a year for an eighteen-month course. Students worked in administrative positions in military headquarters or in port services, or they worked outside the navy as administrators. Training included food services, finance, military pay, cooperative systems, personnel management, social protection, civil service, and government. Other Mauritians trained at navy mechanics schools, where instruction included naval mechanics and refresher courses on seamanship. A two-month specialized course taught propulsion systems, and a five-month course trained naval technicians.

Some Mauritians also attended Zaire's armor training school at Mbanza-Ngungu. Before the start of the Western Sahara conflict, Mauritanian pilots had trained at Algeria's Combined Services Military Academy at Cherchell, which by 1977 had trained ten of Mauritania's twelve pilots.

### **Role of the Military in Society**

The martial tradition has been strong in Mauritania, where the armed forces have played a role that has transcended security needs. Having been integrated into the party structure of the PPM at the Third Party Congress at Nouakchott in January 1968, the resulting "people's army" was to combat the problems of misery, ignorance, and backwardness, as well as those who threatened national security. Accordingly, the armed forces were charged with transforming traditional attitudes and regionalism by good example. The soldier and policeman were to represent model citizens epitomizing Mauritanian independence, as well as the values of self-sacrifice, devotion to duty, and nationalism.

In spite of the lofty aims, recruitment practices perpetuated historic divisions. As noted, a large percentage of officers were Maures, whereas most recruits were blacks. This unevenness in recruitment policy caused resentment on the part of the black population and obstructed the formation of a united national armed forces. Nevertheless, the armed forces trained badly needed technicians and administrators, who could be employed in all areas of the economy, including civil service positions. Military personnel also assisted in civic action programs, such as road-building. The military and police forces offered good pay, security, the possibility of foreign training and, depending on the position, political and economic

power, all of which tended to set the armed forces' officer corps apart as an elite group.

### **Defense Budget and the Economy**

Because of its involvement in the Western Sahara conflict, Mauritania has spent large sums of money on defense. The 1976 defense budget showed an increase of 32.9 percent over 1975, and that of 1977 provided a substantial increase over the 1976 level. In 1977 defense spending consumed 60 percent of the national budget, and in 1980 military spending was the only sector of the budget not cut. Commenting on this decision, one senior Mauritanian official said that no matter what the cost, the government was intent on maintaining its armed forces in order to guarantee its independence and national sovereignty.

Military expenditures severely distorted Mauritania's development. Defense spending diverted funds from rural development, undermined Mauritania's statist economic policies, and limited the business community's prosperity. From 1976 to 1978, businesses and government workers alike paid war taxes and took cuts in pay, and the government faced an increasingly impoverished population. To raise additional funds for defense, Haidalla increased the "solidarity contribution"—an unpopular payment made by salaried workers to the armed forces—from one to two days' pay a month. In addition, companies paid a special tax of 2 percent of sales as their contribution to defense. Ultimately, the unpopular war and its effects on the economy resulted in a military coup in 1978.

### **Civic Action and Disaster Relief**

As a result of drought and desertification throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the government charged the armed forces with epidemic eradication and disaster relief. In addition, the military engineering corps engaged in agricultural development and road maintenance.

### **Foreign Military Assistance**

At independence the French colonial army in Mauritania provided the armed forces with weapons and matériel. Later, in the 1960s and early 1970s, France supplemented Mauritania's defense capacity, training, and matériel as specified in various defense agreements, which provided for mutual defense assistance, for training Mauritanian officers in French military schools, for French overflying rights, and for Mauritanian facilities for French aircraft and naval vessels (see *The Independence Period and the French Military Legacy*, this ch.). In 1973 Mauritania moved to reduce its



*A soldier supervises food distribution.  
Courtesy United States Agency  
for International Development*

dependency on France by unilaterally abandoning these agreements, and on September 2, 1976, Mauritania and France replaced the defense agreement with a technical military pact, which called only for establishment of the military school at Atar; Mauritania refused all other defense-related accords.

Despite these attempts to sever ties with France, Polisario raids in the mid-1970s forced Mauritania again to seek increased military assistance. France, along with Morocco and Spain, stepped up military arms deliveries. The rulers of Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, and Kuwait, all of whom supported fellow monarch King Hassan of Morocco and therefore were anti-Polisario, also financed arms purchases. It was reported that Mauritania received 30 French armored cars and 100 British Land Rovers (some equipped with 120mm recoilless guns) to increase its military mobility and that Saudi Arabia sent ten Pucara aircraft and other military matériel.

The French also sent sixty military specialists to work at the EMIA and supplied arms on a commercial basis. But France's low-key military commitment to Mauritania changed abruptly when in May and October 1977 the Polisario killed two French nationals and kidnapped six others, all of whom were employees of the National Mining and Industrial Company (Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière—SNIM) at Zouïrât. In response to these raids, France installed a military telecommunications system, provided air support for the Mauritanian-Moroccan forces, and supplied troops (from the French base in Senegal) and military advisers, all to protect French citizens and their investments in Mauritania. The French did not react when, a year later, the Dad-dah regime fell.

As Mauritania's defenses deteriorated, it relied even more heavily on Morocco, until by February 1978 the number of Moroccan soldiers in Mauritania reached 10,000 men. In June 1977, the two countries merged their military commands into the Supreme Defense Council. Two Moroccan battalions protected Nouadhibou and the railroad to Zouïrât, where two more Moroccan battalions were stationed. In January 1978, the Supreme Defense Council placed another two Moroccan battalions at Akjoujt and Atar. By this time, Moroccan troops were stationed in all of Mauritania's major towns except Nouakchott.

France also took an increasingly active role as the war progressed. French personnel, the numbers of which had increased from 60 in 1977 to just over 300 in 1978, fully controlled Mauritanian Army training, and France had 1,200 troops stationed in nearby Senegal ready for emergencies. After the military coup in July 1978 and the subsequent cease-fire, however, the number of French

military personnel in Mauritania decreased rapidly. By August 1978, only twenty French military and technical experts remained. The number of nonmilitary experts and advisers had increased, however. Daily flights from the military base at Dakar continued, and although French combat air operations ceased, reconnaissance flights over Mauritanian territory by French aircraft continued. Moreover, the number of French troops at Dakar had increased to 3,000. After the Mauritanian-Polisario peace treaty in August 1979, which saw Morocco remove the bulk of its troops from Mauritania, France agreed to double its military aid to help Mauritania rebuild a small but efficient army.

Shortly thereafter, however, Mauritania reversed its security alliances. Relations with Morocco and France soured while relations with Algeria improved. In May 1980, the CMSN expelled 200 French advisers and technical personnel, thus terminating French training programs at Nouadhibou and French military air communications at Lamantin, near Nouakchott. After the March 16, 1981, pro-Moroccan coup attempt, Mauritania turned to Algeria, which began to supply the sophisticated anti-aircraft armaments Mauritania had previously lacked. By 1981 Algeria was lending military assistance in the form of training and matériel.

In the early 1980s, in the face of persistent regional instability, Nouakchott again turned to Paris for security assurances. In response, the French revived a 1976 military assistance convention providing for thirty training specialists to serve in the modernization of the Mauritanian forces. In March 1987, Jacques Foccart, adviser to the French prime minister, traveled to Mauritania with a message from Prime Minister Jacques Chirac expressing France's desire to continue its military assistance. In 1987 France revised its 1976 military cooperation agreement with Mauritania, incorporating the three standard points of French technical military accords: the disposition of French military personnel within the Mauritanian military, military training for Mauritians in France, and provision of military matériel and logistical assistance.

Algeria also offered support to the Mauritanian military. Algerian president Chadli Bendjedid visited Mauritania in April 1987 to discuss the Western Sahara conflict. He expressed "Algeria's support to the Mauritanian people and their leader in everything related to Mauritania's security, stability, and unity." In particular, he offered to send Algerian troops to Mauritania to protect the petroleum refinery at Nouadhibou, which had been renovated and was being managed by Algeria (see *Energy*, ch. 3). The Mauritanian government, however, refused his offer, citing its strict neutrality

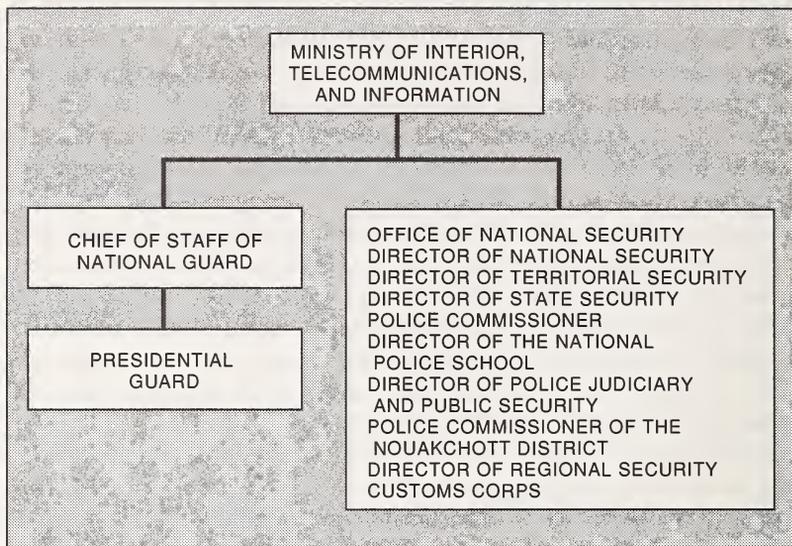


Figure 14. Organization of Internal Security Forces, 1987

in the Western Sahara conflict. Meanwhile, in 1987 Mauritania received substantial military technology, logistical support, and direct budget subventions from several foreign countries, including Canada, France, Kuwait, Algeria, and Morocco.

## Public Order and Internal Security

### Internal Security Forces

In 1987 internal security forces consisted of the police and certain paramilitary forces, including the National Guard, the Presidential Guard, and the National Gendarmerie. The urban-based police, which in 1986 numbered 1,000 men, was organized under the director of national security, Captain Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, who reported to the minister of interior, information, and telecommunications (see fig. 14). Locally, each *préfet* and town mayor had authority over the police in his jurisdiction. The minister exercised command through the governors of the twelve regions (see Local Government, ch. 4).

The police were charged with law enforcement and criminal investigation. In the name of keeping order, police could ban demonstrations and meetings or force them to disperse if order was threatened. They could ban certain persons from certain areas, put them under house arrest, or expel them from the country. The police

could also suspend individual liberties if the president declared a state of emergency.

The National Guard, also subordinate to the Ministry of Interior, Information, and Telecommunications, was responsible for maintaining law and order in rural areas, although at times of civil unrest the unit operated in urban areas. In 1987 the National Guard numbered 1,400. The Presidential Guard was a subdivision of the National Guard and was responsible for protecting the president and his home.

Mauritania's National Gendarmerie, or militarized police force, was responsible for enforcing both civilian and military law in rural and urban areas. In 1987 the gendarmerie was divided into six regional companies and numbered 2,500 men. Originally, this force was part of the army, but by 1987 it had become a separate force and had headquarters in Nouakchott. It was responsible to the armed forces chief of staff.

### **Law and Crime**

In 1980 the government declared sharia (Islamic law) to be the official legal code (see Legal System, ch. 4). Since that time, many Mauritians have criticized sharia for failing to consider environmental or sociological factors contributing to crime, for ignoring official corruption, and for authorizing such brutal and extreme punishment as public whippings and amputations, which were held at Nouakchott stadium in the early 1980s (reportedly accompanied by cheering onlookers). Only in August 1984 was amputation halted.

Treatment of prisoners worsened in the early 1980s when both torture and detention without charge became increasingly routine. Moreover, friends and relatives of prisoners also became victims of harassment and repression. Foreign observers expressed concern about the treatment and well-being of those arrested, especially black prisoners.

In keeping with the tenets of sharia, the government moved to eliminate alcohol consumption (see Tenets of Islam, ch. 2). On October 2, 1986, the cabinet banned the import, purchase, and consumption of alcoholic drinks for Mauritanian nationals; Taya later extended the ban to foreign nationals, although diplomats from foreign embassies and expatriate technical assistants were exempt from the ban. Foreigners violating this law were liable to expulsion; Mauritanian violators risked forty lashes in public as prescribed by sharia.

Article 3 of the CMSN's Constitutional Charter of February 1985 stated that the CMSN had the power to grant amnesty, except for

violations that carried sentences of *qissas* and *hudud* (see the Constitutional Charter, ch. 4). *Qissas* was retributory justice requested by the family of a victim of a crime. *Hudud* was punishment prescribed by sharia for religious crimes that would be dealt with by civil courts in non-Muslim countries, such as adultery and drinking alcoholic beverages.

In the Taya regime, however, strict discipline was tempered with leniency. When Taya seized power, one of his first acts was to pardon most political prisoners, including former President Dadah, as well as five men condemned to life imprisonment for their participation in the March 16, 1981, coup attempt. Among other things, the terms of the general amnesty permitted opposition groups to return to Mauritania.

### **Internal Security Threats**

In 1987 the military government was the most likely arena for power struggles affecting internal security. Aside from factions within the military, there appeared to be no group with a large enough power base or organizational structure to challenge the existing military regime. Despite the personal popularity of President Taya, governmental institutions remained without a broad base of support and provided no outlet for discontent, dissent, or even meaningful debate over national policies (see *Political Power in the Mid-1980s*, ch. 4).

From independence until the 1978 military coup, labor and student unrest and racial clashes presented the most serious threats to internal security. These threats were interrelated because black ethnic groups from the Senegal River Valley actively participated in the unions and student demonstrations.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, labor unions struck primarily in Fd'rik at the Mauritanian Iron Mines Company (Société Anonyme des Mines de Fer de Mauritanie—MIFERMA) complex, whose employees had grievances against the West European overseers. Violence was common, and the army was used to quell the frequent disturbances, causing injuries, deaths, and numerous arrests. In their turn, many students opposed the government's language policy, which in 1966 required students to study Hassaniya Arabic as well as French. Violent confrontations often erupted, and schools were frequently closed for months at a time. Moreover, students often joined forces with MIFERMA strikers in opposition to the PPM.

From the time of the military coup in 1978 through 1987, the CMSN leadership banned all political parties and opposition groups and suspended freedom of assembly, especially public meetings that

intended to address political themes. Labor unions were the only nationwide organizations with any political import that were not dissolved following the 1978 coup. The right to strike existed in theory but was greatly restricted in practice, and extended strikes were strongly opposed by the government. There were only two brief strikes in the early 1980s.

In 1978 serious ethnic conflict erupted between Maures and southern blacks. Blacks resented their overrepresentation as recruits in the Western Sahara conflict and their underrepresentation in the upper echelons of the military. Racial unrest peaked during February and March 1979. For the first time since the military coup in 1978, antigovernment activists distributed hostile tracts in the streets and placed antiregime slogans on walls. The government arrested several people, including black teachers and students who threatened to strike over the language issue. Further troubles occurred during March 1979 when a number of prominent, moderate blacks were arrested for advocating the use of ethnic quotas to fill government jobs; however, they were released a few days later in response to popular pressure.

In an effort to mollify blacks, on March 19, 1979, the government announced the formation of the National Consultative Council. Composed of eighty-seven Maures and seventeen blacks, it was intended to provide a measure of popular participation in decision making until such time as elections could be held. On March 30, all seventeen blacks resigned, charging the council with unequal ethnic representation.

Despite increased ethnic tensions, the government under both Mustapha Ould Salek and Ahmed Ould Bouceif took no action to appease the black community. On the contrary, the new military government virtually barred blacks from government. Moreover, the government took measures in November 1978 that favored Arabic as the sole language in Mauritania's secondary schools, further fueling accusations of economic and political discrimination.

Tensions between blacks and Maures erupted in 1986 following the publication in April of a document entitled *Le Manifeste du Nègro-Mauritanien Opprimé* (Manifesto of the Oppressed Black Mauritanian) (see Ethnic Minorities, ch. 4). The manifesto was circulated in cities and towns in Mauritania and also at the September 1986 Nonaligned Movement summit in Harare, Zimbabwe, and at the Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This document criticized "Mauritanian apartheid" and the white Maure system that ensured the political and economic domination by the Arab-Berbers at the expense of the

black ethnic groups (see *Ethnic Groups and Languages*, ch. 2). The manifesto also took issue with the policy of favoring Arabic over French, the lack of educational opportunities for blacks, and land reform measures. In particular, the manifesto viewed the controversial Land Reform Act of 1983 as a means by which wealthy, urban Maures could appropriate profitable land along the Senegal River, traditionally the homeland of Mauritania's black population.

More ethnic unrest continued into September 1986, when police arrested several black leaders for participating in civil disturbances. Later that month, an additional forty blacks were arrested for what the government labeled subversive activities. In addition, dozens of leading black public figures, including two former cabinet ministers, were detained for questioning about "activities harmful to national unity." Nine of those arrested were later sentenced to five years' imprisonment, and eight were sentenced to four years' imprisonment. The accused had allegedly opposed the land reform measures.

On October 9 and 11, 1986, in response to the September arrests, violence again erupted. Black demonstrators ransacked and burned a fish factory, gasoline station, and pharmacy. The government linked this violence to the African Liberation Forces of Mauritania (*Forces de Libération Africaine de Mauritanie—FLAM*) and the black African manifesto attacking Maure discrimination (see *Ethnic Minorities*, ch. 4). Thirteen of those arrested in the 1986 protests over racial discrimination against blacks were convicted of arson in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou in October 1986. Five of them were sentenced to five years' imprisonment and eight to four years' imprisonment. Five others on trial on similar charges were acquitted. An additional twenty people were tried and convicted in March 1987.

As part of a large-scale crackdown on blacks (and the Toucouleur community in particular) carried out in the second half of 1986, all Toucouleur officers serving at posts of responsibility in the military regional commands were sacked. The administration purged itself of all its Toucouleur governors, *préfets*, and *sous-préfets* serving in the south; they were either sent to the far north or fired. Among those who lost their positions within the CMSN and/or the government as a result of the crackdown was the minister of interior, information, and telecommunications, Lieutenant Colonel Anne Amadou Babali (a Toucouleur), who was transferred to the Ministry of Trade and Transport for about six weeks and then dismissed from government on October 4, 1986. The director of the International Bank of Mauritania (*Banque Internationale pour la*

Mauritanie—BIMA) was fired, and the head of the Red Crescent (Red Cross in Islamic countries) was removed from office. Authorities banned meetings of black self-help groups and cultural associations and even engaged in surveillance of large gatherings of black families, such as weddings. In this tense environment, a group calling itself the National Front of Black Officers (Front National des Officiers Noirs—FRON) emerged and denounced the arbitrary arrests and sentences of dozens of Mauritians who wished only to guarantee civil and political rights for all ethnic groups. FRON blamed the Maure community for the chaos and called for the institution of a multiracial republic.

The government was not about to follow such a drastic prescription. The elections of December 1986 had allowed the semblance of political participation at the local level, a process that Taya described as a first step toward participatory democracy (see Local Elections, ch. 4). To the credit of all Mauritians, the elections proceeded peacefully; however, the problems of ethnic imbalance remained unaddressed by the government.

\* \* \*

There is no comprehensive study that specifically covers Mauritanian national security. Certain aspects, such as the armed forces' involvement in the Western Sahara, are covered fairly inclusively in *Ripe for Resolution* by William I. Zartman and in *The Western Saharans* by Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff. Various periodicals, such as *Frères d'armes*, *Africa Confidential*, *West Africa*, *Jeune Afrique*, *Marchés tropicaux et méditerranéens*, and *Afrique Défense*, sporadically cover Mauritanian security issues. Some statistics on the armed forces can be found in the annual *The Military Balance* published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. (For further information and complete citations, see Bibliography.)



## Appendix

Table

- 1 Metric Conversion Coefficients and Factors
- 2 Herd Size, 1973-84
- 3 Major Army Weapons, 1986
- 4 Major Naval Equipment, 1986
- 5 Major Air Force Equipment, 1986



Table 1. Metric Conversion Coefficients and Factors

When you know	Multiply by	To find
Millimeters .....	0.04	inches
Centimeters .....	0.39	inches
Meters .....	3.3	feet
Kilometers .....	0.62	miles
Hectares (10,000 m <sup>2</sup> ) .....	2.47	acres
Square kilometers .....	0.39	square miles
Cubic meters .....	35.3	cubic feet
Liters .....	0.26	gallons
Kilograms .....	2.2	pounds
Metric tons .....	0.98	long tons
.....	1.1	short tons
.....	2,204	pounds
Degrees Celsius .....	9	degrees Fahrenheit
(Centigrade)	divide by 5 and add 32	

Table 2. Herd Size, 1973-84  
(in thousands)

	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
Livestock												
Cattle	1,500	1,100	1,100	1,100	1,200	1,100	1,133	1,246	1,370	1,411	987	889
Sheep and goats	6,500	5,800	6,100	6,600	7,000	7,200	7,400	7,600	7,600	7,550	6,120	5,692
Camels	700	670	700	707	714	728	735	743	750	757	719	697

Table 3. Major Army Weapons, 1986

Type and Description	Country of Origin	In Inventory
Armored fighting vehicles		
EBR-75 armored reconnaissance vehicle, equipped with 75mm gun . . . . .	France	15
AML-60 light armored car, equipped with 60mm gun . . . . .	-do-	39
AML-90 light armored car, equipped with 90mm gun . . . . .	-do-	14
M-3A1 light armored car . . . . .	United States	12
M-3 half track armored personnel carrier . . . . .	-do-	40
Artillery		
120mm mortar . . . . .	France	8
81mm mortar . . . . .	-do-	1
Antitank weapons		
M18 57mm recoilless rifle . . . . .	United States	n.a.
M20 75mm recoilless rifle . . . . .	-do-	n.a.
M40 106mm recoilless rifle . . . . .	-do-	n.a.
Air defense		
ZPU-2 with 14.5mm gun . . . . .	Soviet Union	n.a.
ZU-23-2 with 23mm gun . . . . .	-do-	n.a.
M-1939 with 37mm gun . . . . .	-do-	n.a.
SA-7 surface-to-air missile . . . . .	-do-	n.a.

n.a.—not available.

Source: Based on information from *The Military Balance, 1986-1987*, London, 1986, 129; and *World Defence Almanac (Military Technology, No. 13/86)*, December 1986, 310.

Table 4. Major Naval Equipment, 1986

Type and Description	Country of Origin	In Inventory
Fast attack craft, patrol		
Barcelo-type FAC (El Vaiz class) . . . . .	Spain	3
Le Dix Juillet Patra class . . . . .	France	1
Esterel 32-meter class (Tichit class) . . . . .	-do-	2
Coastal patrol craft		
Esterel 18-meter class . . . . .	-do-	2
Miscellaneous		
Ex-Senegalese LCM landing craft . . . . .	-do-	1
Service launch . . . . .	-do-	1

Source: Based on information from *The Military Balance, 1986-1987*, London, 1986, 129; and *World Defence Almanac (Military Technology, No. 13/86)*, December 1986, 310.

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*Table 5. Major Air Force Equipment, 1986*

Type and Description	Country of Origin	In Inventory
Ground attack		
Britten Norman-2A with underwing gun pods and rockets . . . . .	Britain	6
Coastal patrol		
Piper Cheyenne IIs . . . . .	United States	2
Training and liaison		
Reims-Cessna 337 Super Skymasters . . .	France	3
Counterinsurgency		
Armed Reims-Cessna FTB 337Gs . . . . .	-do-	2
Transport		
DHC-5D Buffaloes . . . . .	Canada	2
Skycan 3Ms . . . . .	Britain	3
Broussard . . . . .	France	1
Aermacchi-Lockheed . . . . .	Italy	1
Hughes 500M helicopters . . . . .	United States	4
Aérospatiale Caravelle . . . . .	France	1
Grumman Gulfstream II . . . . .	United States	1

Source: Based on information from *The Military Balance, 1986-1987*, London, 1986, 129; and *World Defence Almanac (Military Technology, No. 13/86)*, December 1986, 310.

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## Glossary

- amir—Title of an independent chieftain or regional political leader. Literally, “commander.” Also seen as *emir*.
- berms—a narrow ledge typically at the top of a slope. Here, walls of bulldozed sand constructed within the Western Sahara virtually paralleling its borders with Mauritania. Moroccan forces constructed the berms, which were subsequently fitted with special sensory devices to prevent Polisario (*q.v.*) guerrillas from infiltrating into territory controlled by Morocco.
- Chemama—Northern bank of the Senegal River, extending sixteen to thirty-two kilometers north of the river and containing fertile alluvial soil.
- clericalism—System under which a religious hierarchy exerts political authority. Historically, clericalism was common among smaller polities in Muslim areas of West Africa.
- Franc Zone—Collection of thirteen francophone African countries whose currency is based on the French franc.
- GDP—Gross Domestic Product. A measure of the value of domestic goods and services produced by an economy over a period of time, such as a year. Only output values of goods for final consumption and investment are included because the values of primary and intermediate production are assumed to be included in final prices. GDP is sometimes aggregated and shown at market prices, meaning that indirect taxes and subsidies are included; when these have been eliminated, the result is GDP at factor cost.
- gum arabic—water-soluble gum obtained from several varieties of acacia and used in textile finishing and in inks, confectionery, pharmacy, and the manufacture of adhesives.
- hartani* (pl., *harratin*)—term referring to freed former slaves. In Arabic, literally “plowman,” referring to the low status of *harratin*.
- imam—Muslim leader who is a recognized authority on Islamic theology and law; also, the prayer leader of a mosque. The term is used to designate the leader of the Islamic community in a particular locale.
- IMF—International Monetary Fund. Established along with the World Bank (*q.v.*) in 1945, the IMF is a specialized agency affiliated with the United Nations and is responsible for stabilizing international exchange rates and payments. The main business of the IMF is the provision of loans to its members

(including industrialized and developing countries) when they experience balance of payments difficulties. These loans frequently carry conditions that require substantial internal economic adjustments by the recipients, most of which are developing countries.

*indigénat*—Refers to denizenship and rights of natives. In colonial French West Africa, the colonial system of discipline characterized by arbitrary and summary judgments accorded Africans living in rural areas. The *indigénat* was abolished in 1945.

*jamaa*—in Arabic, community or group.

Mauritanian Kadihine Party—Clandestine leftist political party comprised primarily of Mauritania's proletariat and other low-wage workers. The party was formed in 1973 after the Mauritanian People's Party, Mauritania's sole political party, absorbed the country's previously independent trade union. Literally *kadihine* means "the oppressed" or "downtrodden."

Maghrib (adj. Maghribian)—The western Islamic world (northwest Africa); distinguished from the Mashriq or eastern Islamic world (the Middle East). Traditionally includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and what is now Libya. Literally, "the time or place of the sunset—the west." For its Arab conquerors, the region was the "island of the west" (*jazirat al maghrib*), the land between the "sea of sand" (Sahara) and the Mediterranean Sea. Also translated as *Maghreb*.

Maliki rite—Interpretation of Islamic theology and law based on the teachings of Imam Malik, an Egyptian jurist of the eighth century.

*marabout*—In West Africa, a Muslim prayer leader, teacher, and sometimes a healer who is venerated locally and believed to be touched by divine grace, which sometimes conferred the right to rule as well. Frequently called upon to arbitrate disputes. Translation of *al murabitun* (those who have made a religious retreat). In some locales, the title became the monopoly of certain families, who thus formed maraboutic castes.

OUA—Organization of African Unity. Inter-African organization with a membership of forty-nine African states.

ouguiya (UM)—Mauritanian currency; in 1987, UM73.88 equals US\$1.

Paris Club—A noninstitutional framework whereby developed nations that have made loans or guaranteed official or private export credits to developing nations meet to discuss borrowers' ability to repay debts. The organization, which met for the first time in 1956, has no formal or institutional existence and no fixed membership. Its secretariat is run by the French treasury, and it has a close relationship with the World Bank (*q.v.*),

- International Monetary Fund (*q.v.*), and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).
- Polisario—Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (Frente Popular por la Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro). Sahrawi liberation group seeking national self-determination in the Western Sahara. Polisario guerrillas constitute the military wing of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), a government-in-exile for what in 1987 was known as the Western Sahara. The main base for the SADR and Polisario was Tindouf, Algeria.
- SADR—Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. The governing arm of the Polisario (*q.v.*).
- Sahelian—Pertains to the region south of the Sahara encompassing Cape Verde, Mauritania, southern Mali, Burkina Faso, southern Niger, and northern Nigeria. Literally, “coastal,” in which the Sahara is figuratively considered to be a sea.
- sharia—Traditional code of Islamic law, both civil and criminal, based in part on the Quran. Also drawn from the *hadith* (sayings and teachings of the Prophet), from the consensus of Islamic belief (*ijma*; i.e., consensus of the authorities on a legal question); and analogy (*qiyas*; i.e., an elaboration of the intent of the law).
- UM—The currency symbol for the ouguiya (*q.v.*).
- West Sahara(n)—Region of West Africa comprising parts of Mauritania, Mali, Morocco, and Algeria.
- Western Sahara—Formerly Spanish Sahara. Region of West Africa bordered on the west by the Atlantic Ocean, on the north by Morocco, on the south and nearly all of its west by Mauritania. In the northwest corner, it shares a very short border with Algeria. Spain divided Spanish Sahara between Morocco and Mauritania—ignoring the sentiments of indigenous groups—when it relinquished colonial control in 1976. Subsequently Polisario (*q.v.*) guerrillas supported by Algeria among other states waged a war for independence primarily against forces of Morocco.
- World Bank—Informal name used to designate a group of three affiliated international institutions: the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the International Development Association (IDA), and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). The IBRD, established in 1945, has the primary purpose of providing loans to developing countries for productive projects. The IDA, a legally separate loan fund but administered by the staff of the IBRD, was set up in 1960 to furnish credits to the poorest developing countries on much

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easier terms than those of conventional IBRD loans. The IFC, founded in 1956, supplements the activities of the IBRD through loans and assistance designed specifically to encourage the growth of productive private enterprises in the less developed countries. The president and certain senior officers of the IBRD hold the same positions in the IFC. The three institutions are owned by the governments of the countries that subscribe their capital. To participate in the World Bank group, member states must first belong to the International Monetary Fund (IMF—*q. v.*).

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