MEMBER PROFILE

HARATIN

Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA-Mauritania)
Status: Largest minority group in Mauritania and among the most economically and politically marginalised

Population: 1,355,000 (estimation)

Language: Arabic (official language in Mauritania), Hassaniyya (language used by the Haratin, a hybrid of Arabic and Berber), Wolof, Soniké, Pulaar and French (national languages in Mauritania)

Religion: Sunni Islam, with elements of Sufism

UNPO REPRESENTATION: Initiative de Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste en Mauritanie (Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement in Mauritania, or IRA Mauritania)

The Haratin are represented at UNPO by IRA-Mauritania. They were admitted as a Member on 16 September 2011. IRA-Mauritania had been founded by Biram Dah Abeid in 2008, as part of an effort to unite anti-slavery activists and coordinate abolitionist actions. To this day, the Mauritanian government refuses to recognise and register IRA as an association, regularly harassing and arresting its members on charges of belonging to an illegal organisation.

OVERVIEW

The Haratin of Mauritania have to endure harsh living conditions and face discrimination on a daily basis and in all walks of life. Despite having abolished slavery already three times in the country’s history, the 2016 Global Slavery Index ranks Mauritania seventh in terms of prevalence of slavery on its soil. It is estimated that more than one percent of Mauritians – almost all of them from the Haratin group – live as slaves. Mauritania last outlawed slavery in its 2007 Anti-Slavery Law, criminalising the practice and making slavery a crime against humanity, but the country’s administration took no concrete steps to enforce this law. To make things worse, the Mauritanian government violently suppresses and systematically silences activists who dare raising their voice against the widespread prevalence of this archaic practice.

UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

IRA-Mauritania seeks to raise awareness about human rights violations, in particular slavery, among the Mauritanian authorities and the wider population. Its main objectives are outlined on its website: struggling against slavery and its consequences; promoting cultural rights and equal opportunities; raising awareness about this question among African, European and international decision-makers; allowing for the most vulnerable citizens to be heard; building a society based on the Rule of Law, equality, justice and mutual respect; denouncing slave “masters” and the Mauritanian State’s complicity; identifying the difficulties facing the weakest and bringing optimal solutions to them; promoting national unity by putting all citizens on an equal footing.
CURRENT ISSUES

At present, half of Mauritania’s Haratin population are forced to live their lives as de facto slaves. Traditionally, Haratin men work in agriculture, while Haratin women are made to do domestic work. Those who have been freed face persistent discrimination in all walks of life, particularly in the areas of education, healthcare, land rights, employment and political participation. Haratin abolitionist activists are frequently arrested, beaten and harassed by the authorities.

Slavery

Modern-day slavery is a common practice in Mauritania despite the fact that slavery was abolished several times in recent history (in 1905, 1961 and 1981). The 2007 Anti-Slavery Law finally criminalised slavery. The law institutes prison sentences of five to ten years for slaveholders and two years for apologists of slavery. However, as of March 2015, only one person has been sentenced under this law. Another decree which was implemented on 7 May 2011 stipulates that all domestic workers must be offered reasonable contracts by the employer, thereby tacitly recognising the plight of domestic workers who work in slavery-like conditions, but the effects of this decree are marginal at best. To make things worse, the 2007 law only inadequately defines slavery and provides no initiative to support freed slaves in building a new life.

The effectiveness of the 2007 Law is further hampered by its requirement that slaves must file a legal complaint themselves before prosecution can be pursued. NGOs are not allowed to make complaints on their behalf. Since this process is complicated and most Haratin are illiterate, this hinders the implementation of the law. No mechanisms are provided to assist slaves in filing complaints. Since the 2007 Act included no measures for publicising its provisions to the general population, many Haratin have never heard of it and are thus still unaware of the abolition of slavery.

Mauritanian authorities insist that only the last “vestiges of slavery” remain, despite all evidence pointing to the contrary. Indeed, the government’s measures against slavery have been largely symbolic, with only a handful of cases having been to trial and resulted in convictions.

Enslaved Haratin usually do not receive education, are illiterate and hence have very limited employment prospects even after being freed. According to the US State Department’s Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2016, “slavery-like practices, which typically flowed from ancestral master-slave relationships and involved both adults and children, continued throughout the year. Former slaves and their descendants remained in a dependent status [...] Some former slaves reportedly continued to work for their former masters or others under exploitative conditions to retain access to land that they traditionally farmed.” After having been freed, slaves are sometimes paid a nominal fee with no fixed working hours. However, the amount they earn does not provide them with an adequate salary to freely choose their employment. This perpetuates the belief that the slaves are free when, in fact, they are still tied to their “master” due to economic dependency. In many cases, the slave or freed slave is forced to bequeath any savings or possessions to their master upon their death, hindering any possible opportunity to build up generational wealth amongst Haratin families.

There are few in-country initiatives in place which could help the Haratin advance their socio-economic status – another major failing of the 2007 Anti-Slavery law. Over the years, some development projects providing microcredits to the poor have been implemented in
Mauritania by, for example, the Bretton Woods institutions. However, the Haratin were usually denied access to these projects, and the foreign aid thus did not reach those who really needed it.

In addition to this, the Haratins’ economic emancipation is hampered by them being denied access to property. As a result of the Land Reform Act of 1983, the lands Haratin have been cultivating for generations under feudalistic conditions are subject to land-grabbing and can be leased to national or foreign investors at any time. Former slaves involved in land disputes and affected by forced evictions have been attacked with impunity. Furthermore, there are numerous cases of inheritance disputes since traditionally “masters” inherit their slaves’ possessions.

**Discrimination**

The Haratin are routinely discriminated against and often have limited access to economic opportunities or services such as education and healthcare. They are the poorest fraction of Mauritania’s population. This perpetuates widespread belief in Mauritania that the Haratin are inferior to their Arab-Berber counterparts. Slavery disproportionately affects Haratin women and children. Female Haratin slaves suffer from triple discrimination, first as women, second as mothers and third as slaves. Due to their almost complete lack of participation in education, employment, politics and the legal system, they continue to be one of the most marginalised segments of Mauritanian society. Their children are generally considered property of the slave master and are often given away as dowry or gifts to other members of the master’s family. Meanwhile, the Mauritanian government continues to claim that racism towards women of non-Arab descent does not exist.

According to the World Health Organization, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) affects more than 70 percent of girls and women aged 15 to 49 in Mauritania.1 Marginalized women living in areas with high levels of poverty and little access to health services are particularly at risk. A broad national programme lobbying for a law to criminalize excision was launched in the country in 2008. In 2011, religious leaders issued a fatwa forbidding FGM/C while, in 2012, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Mauritanian government, religious leaders and NGO partners collaborated to publicly denounce this practice. However, progress in this regard remains very slow.

A large number of those enslaved in Mauritania are children. Most of them born slaves, they start working at a very young age, forced to work more than 14 hours a day. While girls usually work as domestic help, boys are forced to work as beggars, herders or manual labourers. Most child slaves grow up not knowing their family and are thus denied the support a family network could provide. Even though officially six years of school attendance are mandatory in Mauritania, most Haratin children do not receive any form of education. Child protection laws lack enforcement and the government blocks attempts by victims to file official complaints about slavery in Mauritanian courts. This is particularly true for cases in which the allegations involve public officials or others in positions of power. According to Mauritanian activists, the systematic harassment of abolitionists as well as the government’s reluctance to implement anti-slavery laws and prosecute slave-masters is a direct result of most high-level government officials being slave owners themselves.

**Human Rights Activism**

Haratin human rights defenders try to raise the profile of the issue of slavery through advocacy and lobbying, as well as attempts at implementing actions to urge the authorities

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to enforce existing legislation. Anti-slavery activists and human rights defenders in Mauritania are regularly met with a lack of cooperation and even repression from the authorities. Although grassroots NGOs seek out the enslaved and, with their consent, bring many of them to the authorities, instead of redress they often face arrest, physical abuse and detention on trumped-up charges. The leaders of peaceful sit-ins and demonstrations protesting the failure to observe the Anti-Slavery Law are particularly targeted with violence and intimidation and report receiving death threats and being put under surveillance. The authorities also refuse anti-slavery NGOs the ability to register as official civil society organisations, in addition to attempting to infiltrate and co-opt anti-slavery NGOs through bribery or other means.

Those who report such stories also receive threats. The only member of the Mauritanian Human Rights Commission to represent the Haratin (in an advisory role) found his position untenable and has since resigned, leaving no Haratin representative in the institution. Other cases include the detention of Haratin newspaper editors and journalists critical of the government, as well as the killing of activists protesting against the lack of inclusion of the Haratin in the national census. Officials have also been fired because of their involvement in human rights advocacy.

The leader of IRA-Mauritania, Mr Biram Dah Abeid, was relieved of his post as Senior Advisor to the President of the National Commission for Human Rights and told by the Ministry of the Interior to cease his struggle against slavery or he would face prosecution and imprisonment for “illegal activities”. Abeid founded IRA in 2008 to bring anti-slavery activists together and coordinate their activities. Its members are regularly being harassed and arrested on trumped-up charges of belonging to an illegal organisation, threatening
national security, inciting racial hatred and social division or disrespecting Islam. In August 2016, thirteen IRA activists have been sentenced to 3 to 15 years in prison after a bogus trial, having been arrested following riots in the slums of Nouakchott in June of the same year. None of them were present at the time and they were targeted purely because of their membership to IRA and their stance against slavery.

Abeid has become the face of antislavery activism in Mauritania. He has been imprisoned several times, was runner-up in the 2014 presidential elections, travelled the world to receive human rights prizes for raising awareness of the plight of the Haratin and given interviews to major international news outlets. From January 2015 to May 2016, Abeid and IRA vice-president Brahim Bilal Ramdhan were imprisoned on charges of belonging to an unrecognised organisation, leading an unauthorised rally and violence against the police.

Since its creation, IRA has helped to put about twenty slave owners in jail, though often for brief terms. As other owners hear about the arrests, they sometimes release their slaves in a ripple of fear. Working through a network of nine thousand activists, IRA has freed thousands of slaves around the country. The organisation works with former slaves on rehabilitation and vocational training programmes and supports the children of former slaves with literacy projects, for instance.

Tragically, however, the Mauritanian government severely suppresses any form of public dissent. Mauritania continues to fail in upholding the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association of its citizens. Demonstrations in support of imprisoned anti-slavery activists are often brutally cracked down on by the authorities. Mauritanian security forces usually use tear gas to disperse the crowds and beat up, abduct and forcibly disappear protesters.

**Torture and Other Ill-Treatment**

According to Amnesty International, Mauritanian prison wards use torture to extract confessions or punish detainees. Women, children, homosexuals, political prisoners, as well as anti-slavery activists are prime targets of such ill-treatment. The use of torture is facilitated by the law, which authorises the police to hold suspects in custody for up to 45 days if they are believed to be a threat to national security. A delegation of lawyers and NGO officials who have been able to visit anti-slavery detainees in November 2014 stressed that the conditions endured by the activists were degrading and in violation of international law. The latter reportedly had to spend their nights standing in small, overcrowded cells. On 17 February 2015, in a letter to the prosecutor of the West Nouakchott Court, the activists’ lawyers reported that their clients had been subjected to torture and had been forced to spend most of their time with their hands cuffed behind their backs and their legs tied.

**Political Marginalisation**

The Haratin remain marginalised and underrepresented in political and public offices. They are also excluded from the voting process as most Haratin lack any form of official documents which would allow them to register on voters’ lists. Belonging to the highest social class and being the most affluent, politicians of Afro-Berber descent own much of the land and are therefore in a position where they can threaten their Haratin tenants or slaves with eviction should they not vote for their desired candidate. Another barrier to voting is the lack of sufficient education for the Haratin. According to the Institute for Statistics of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, illiteracy is at 46% in Mauritania.² The majority of those that are illiterate are Haratin, preventing them from

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following political developments. As a consequence, they lack proper representation in decision-making bodies and are often not even aware of their rights.

As of today, the Haratin are not recognized as a constituent group within the population, nor is there any official recognition of them suffering from racism and discrimination. They are not even able to self-identify as Haratin and their non-recognition as a distinct group prevents them from enjoying even the most basic cultural rights, such as the right to preserve their own culture, to practice their own religion to use their own language.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The enslavement of Black Africans by Arabs begun in the 8th century and accelerated from the 11th century onward, as the political situation of the area became more stable and slavery and the caste system became institutionalised. There was limited contact with Europeans until the 16th century with sporadic raids by Portuguese transatlantic slave traders, yet until the 19th century Mauritania was deemed inhospitable by Europeans. In 1858, France entered treaty relations with local leaders, but it was not until the early 20th century that colonisation began in earnest and by 1912, the French military had conquered most of Mauritania. For the Haratin, there were little improvements under French colonial rule despite the Circulaire Ponty of 1 February 1901 abolishing the right of a master to pursue and recover a slave. In 1906, the abolition of slavery in all French colonial possessions was just as ineffectual, as thousands of slaves in West Africa escaped only to be returned to their masters by the French administration. The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the League of Nations launched initiatives in the 1920s to tackle the question of ‘slave-like’ conditions, leading to the Anti-Slavery Convention in 1926, followed by the Forced Labour Convention in 1930.

The first elected head of State of Mauritania, Moktar Ould Daddah, became President of the Executive Council in 1958, then Prime Minister in 1959 and President of the newly independent Islamic Republic of Mauritania in 1961. The Mauritanian Constitution was adopted, with the incorporation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights tacitly abolishing slavery. Daddah formalised Mauritania as a one-party State in 1964 and he was re-elected and remained uncontested until a coup led by army commander Mustafa Ould Saied in 1978 brought to power a military junta. In 1979, another coup saw Saied replaced by Colonel Muhammad Louly, succeeded by Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah in 1980. A new law was passed in 1981 to abolish slavery once more, albeit with the provision that slave owners, not slaves, would receive compensation. Thus Mauritania was the last country in the world to abolish slavery; however, the law fell short of the international precedent of criminalising the practice. Furthermore, it soon became apparent that the concern with oppressed groups which resulted in the establishment of the law was merely a tactic to prevent the new regime from being threatened.

In 1984, Haidallah was deposed by Colonel Maouya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya, who remained in power until another military coup lead by Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall in 2005. This period was marked not only by political instability but also extensive ethnic violence and human rights abuses. Between 1990 and 1991, a campaign of extreme violence took place
against a background of Arabization, interference with black Mauritians’ association rights, expropriation and slavery. The Mauritanian government exacerbated ethnic tensions further by deporting tens of thousands of black Mauritians, many of whom still reside in refugee camps in Mali and Senegal. The exact number of expulsions is not known, but the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that, as of June 1991, 52,995 Mauritanian refugees were living in Senegal and at least 13,000 in Mali.

In 2007, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi became president following the first fully democratic elections in Mauritania, soon to be deposed by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz during a coup in 2008. Aziz is the current President of Mauritania, having been elected in 2009.

CULTURE

The Haratin, also referred to as "Black Moors", are Mauritania’s largest minority group. The name Haratin derives from the Arabic word for “freedom” which was applied to slaves freed after the 1905 Abolition Law came into effect. In contrast, "Abd" or "Abid" was ascribed to a slave’s name to denote enslavement. To this day, this term is sometimes used in reference to the Mauritanian slave community.

Originally from Sub-Saharan Africa, the Haratins’ territory was invaded, and their people enslaved and assimilated during raids by Arab-Berbers from the 8th century onwards. This resulted in an erosion of their pre-enslavement culture. Today’s language and identity are derived to a large extent from Arab-Berber (Moorish) culture which remains dominant in the political, economic and security spheres of Mauritania. The Haratins’ dance and music traditions reflect their history of enslavement and – while being heavily influenced by Arab-Berber culture and Islam – remnants of their original musical culture have survived. Similar to the way gospel music is historically linked with African-American culture, music served and still serves as a means for the Haratin to express a yearning for freedom. Instruments commonly used by the Haratin are the Akoting flute and the Tam Tam.

IMPORTANT FACTS

Mauritanian society is marked by a high proportion of agricultural labourers and the relative isolation of most communities in this vast, sparsely populated land. The geography makes laws difficult to enforce for the government based in Nouakchott. Since 1980, the Mauritanian legal system has been based on Islamic law and jurisprudence as interpreted by local judges. A High Council of Islam composed of five individuals and appointed by the President advises on legal matters at the President's request. The judiciary also includes the lower courts, labour and military courts, the Court of State Security, a six-member Constitutional Council, a High Court of Justice, and a Supreme Court, the highest court of appeal, which deals with administrative as well as civil matters. On the subject of the legal status of slavery, Mauritania has added reservations to several international human rights instruments on provisions that are contradictory to Sharia Law. Legal provisions are further undermined by conditions stipulating that third-parties cannot file complaints on behalf of slaves, thus hampering NGO efforts to combat slavery.

Many Islamic scholars in Mauritania still advocate for the legality of slavery and hinder social change. However, other Islamic scholars have repeatedly pointed out that the Qur’an describes all Muslims as brothers and equal in each other’s eyes, therefore religious texts that are not regarded as sacred and advocate slavery should be dismissed. In Mauritania, however, these views are in the minority, despite the Constitution stating that all citizens are of equal rights and standing. The dominant classes in particular use the apocryphal Mukhtasar al-Khalil, a legal text of Islamic tradition which conflicts with the Qur’an’s stance on equality, to justify slavery. In 2012, prominent antislavery activist Biram Dah Abeid burned copies of the text on the street as a public gesture to highlight this discrepancy and
assert the illegitimacy of Mukhtasar al-Khalil. He was subsequently arrested and tried for apostasy, but the trial was never completed and the Mauritanian government has since pledged to raise awareness of Islam’s condemnation of slavery. This decision can be seen as a way to appease the international community following worldwide outrage at Abeid’s arrest.
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