



Geography

The name of this country, given by the French, references the name of a province of the Roman Empire. Officially christened The Islamic Republic of Mauritania, it covers over 1 million km² of land in North West Africa. Bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west, Mauritania shares borders with the Western Sahara, Algeria, Mali and Senegal. Located in the Sahara Desert, Mauritania is more than half desert with a hot and dry climate but with significant variations in temperature. Annual rainfall is generally less than 4 inches. The Senegal Valley is the only region where annual rainfall reaches almost 26 inches thus making it an important region for agriculture.

Population

Nouakchott, the capital, has a population of 720,000 inhabitants. It is by far the largest city ahead of Nouadhibou which barely counts 100,000 people. The total population of the country is 3.1 million and is nearly entirely Muslim with Islam being the official religion of Mauritania. The Moors of Arab and Berber origin, represent 4/5 of the population. They are semi-nomadic and live in camps. Arabs and Africans make up 2 of the other largest groups. These are generally sedentary farmers including the Toucouleur, Soninke, Fulani and Wolof peoples.

Arab and Muslim culture have profoundly influenced Mauritanian art well-known for its intricate and detailed jewelry and silver handicrafts. Arabic is the official language.

History

Populated by a largely black agrarian people, the region was invaded beginning in the 4th Century by nomadic Berbers well-skilled in camel riding. The region was incorporated into the Almoravide Empire which reached from Senegal to Spain and was Islamized from the 11th to

the 12th Centuries. Arabs did not penetrate the country until after 1400. In the 15th Century contact with Europe began as traders of salt and gum were seeking slaves. After 1858 Mauritania was progressively occupied by the French moving north from Senegal. Despite a persistent resistance Mauritania eventually became a colony of French West Africa in 1920 although total submission was not achieved until 1934. In 1958 Mauritania declared itself as an Islamic Republic and acquired independence in 1960 under the presidency of Moktar Ould Daddah.

In November 1975, Mauritania, fearing that Morocco would attempt to expand its borders, agreed to divide and annex Western Sahara with its powerful neighbor (Madrid Accord). However, the Saharawi people formed the group The Polisario and began guerilla warfare against the two countries. In July 1978, Moktar Ould Daddah was ousted from power by the Military Committee for National Recovery. Immediately The Polisario announced a cease fire. In August 1979 (The Alger Accord with The Polisario) Mauritania exited the war. In January 1980, Colonel Khouna Ould Haidalla took power as president of the Military Committee for National Salvation. In July he abolished slavery which at that time involved around 150,000 people and in December called for a civil government which was repeatedly challenged by a series of failed coups d'état. In February 1984 Mauritania recognized The Arab Democratic Saharawi Republic but then Colonel Ould Haidalla was dismissed by his party and replaced by Colonel Maawiyah Sid Ahmed Ould Taya.

The army pursued the arabization of the country by eliminating Black Africans from positions of power in the army and the administration. The massacre of Moors in Senegal in the spring of 1989 (a reaction to the shooting of two Senegalese by Moorish border guards) provoked violent reprisals against Black Africans in Mauritania including a large number of expulsions. Meanwhile in 1991, a new constitution was adopted by referendum authorizing a multi-party system and guaranteeing freedom of press. In January 1992 the first multi-party elections since independence were held despite being tainted by claims of fraud by the opposition that boycotted the elections. As a result, the legislative elections in March confirmed Colonel Ould Taya as president.

Reelected in 1997 despite strong objections regarding the state of freedoms in the country, he was forced from power August 3, 2005 by the army. The Military Council for Justice and Democracy officially took power to "put a definitive end to the oppressive activities of the defunct authority and to put in place real democratic institutions". The head of state as a result of the military take over, Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, respected his promises and did not stand for presidential elections in March 2007. The new president of Mauritania, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, took oath on April 19, 2007. He was the first democratically elected president without the presence of large scale fraud since Mauritania's independence. However in August 2008 there was a coup and the general Ould Abdelaziz proclaimed himself head of State. Less than

one year later, July 18 2009, he was elected President with 52.58% of the vote. General Abdelaziz presents himself as a sort of "father of the people".

To protest against the regime and the political situation in his country, a wealthy businessman of 43 years attempted to set himself on fire January 17 2011 in front of the Senate near the presidency of the country. He imitated the gesture of the young Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi, who just a month earlier, had committed suicide in this way, thus launching the "Revolution of Jasmine" which was to oust President Ben Ali.

This event caused a wave of popular protests, unprecedented in the history of the country since independence. These events affect the entire country and all sectors of its society; social conflict sometimes lasts a long time, showing the determination of the protesters, but without becoming a unified political and social movement. Although not normally exceeding 1,000 people, the protests increased in March: every Tuesday and Friday, resulting also in strikes. The government responded to the challenge with the promise of 22.6 million euros to bring down the price of basic commodities by 30%.

Challenges of a political nature were made only by a movement of young people gathered in a "February 25 movement," created on the Internet.

Police repression and arrests have caused unease among politicians who have denounced the authoritarian reaction of the president. June 23, the criminalization of press offenses is removed.

The Christian Community

Islam is the state religion and it is strictly forbidden to leave Islam. Article 306 of the 1984 Penal Code established that a convert from Islam who does not return to Islam within 3 days of having been identified as an apostate will be condemned to death and his property will be confiscated by the State Treasury.

According to the International Report on Religious Freedom, no non Muslim group has ever been recognized in this country including the Catholic Church that functions openly there.

Despite the religious monopoly of Islam, the Gospel is advancing in miraculous ways such as an imam who presented the Jesus film in his mosque. Many Mauritians are experiencing dreams and visions. There are about 200 Christians in the country that are spread out among about a dozen different groups.

In the spring of 2009, Christopher Logust, an American Christian, was arrested then beaten in headquarters of the technology and language group that he was directing in the capitol, Nouakchott. The Maghreb Al-Qaeda branch claimed responsibility in a communiqué which accused the victim of performing "proselytization activities".

In January 2011, Mauritania was seen as the worst country in North Africa in the persecution index published by the Christian Association "Open Doors", which specializes in defending the oppressed Church and Christians in the world. It occupied the 13th place out of the 50 countries noted for their religious intolerance. Open Doors highlighted that the influence of al-Qaeda terrorists there has increased.