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MAURITANIA

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The Islamic Republic of Mauritania was proclaimed on November 28, 1958 as part of the French Community project in which General de Gaulle's France was granting relative autonomy to its former colonies. It became independent two years later, on November 28, 1960. Between 1960 and 1978, Mauritania was ruled by a single party and the entire media was under its complete control. In July 1978, the army seized power; six years later another military coup placed Maaouya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya in power. In 1991, the military authorities organized a constitutional referendum and a multi-party system was adopted; Taya won the 1992 presidential election.

After the 1991 referendum, an order concerning the freedom of the press was promulgated on July 25 of the same year. This began a huge media boost and many new publications appeared in both Arabic and French. Between 1991 and 2005, despite the opening of political life, the media suffered serious infringements on their freedom: frequent cases of censorship, suspensions, and other interference. The media experienced a baptism of fire, being "a candle glowing in the dark." During this time, considered an "exceptional period," the print media (the only authorized kind) tried its best to fulfill its duties as a political actor as well as an agent of economic and social development. Despite the numerous obstacles thrown in its path, the press gained significant experience in all areas related to media and journalism.

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The MSI panel discussion pointed out that the media sector in Mauritania has entered a phase characterized by renewed dynamism. However, important deficiencies remain at a legal and practical level, and the length of time that new laws have been in place makes it difficult to judge whether progress made will endure.

MAURITANIA AT A GLANCE

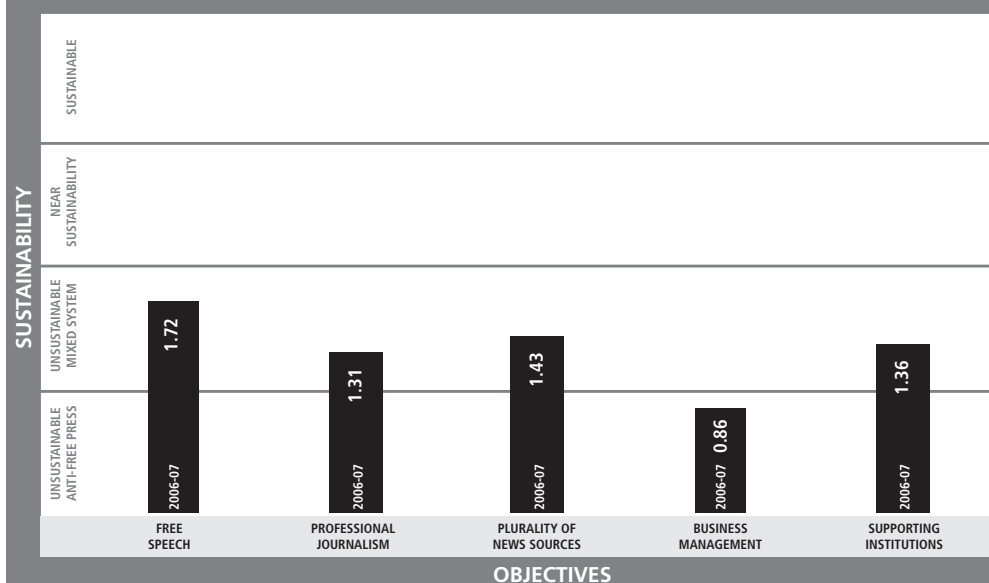
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,364,940 (July 2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Nouakchott
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** N/A
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 100% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Arabic (official), Pulaar, Soninke, French, Hassaniya, Wolof (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2006-Atlas):** \$2.325 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **GNI per capita (2006-PPP):** \$1,970 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **Literacy rate:** 51.2% (male 59.5%, female 43.4%) (2000 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi (since April 19, 2007)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 5 daily newspapers; Radio: no private radio stations; Television stations: no private television stations
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top four by circulation: *Le Calame, L'Eveil Hebdo, La Tribune, L'Authentique*
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Mauritanian News Agency
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 100,000 (2006 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: MAURITANIA



Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.72

The score in this objective reflects positive steps taken on paper, but to a lesser degree in practice. In particular, low scores for Indicators 5, 6, and 7, preferential legal treatment of public media, libel laws, and access to information, more than counterbalanced the lone high score in Indicator 8, media access to international news sources.

The enormous progress witnessed in Mauritania with respect to this objective materialized as a result of the Ordinance on the Printed Press. Article 2 of this ordinance stipulates “The right to information and the freedom of the press as consequences of the freedom of speech are inalienable rights of the citizens.” Therefore, the press is subject to a legal regime that intends to facilitate citizen access to news and information. Panelists—like the spirit of the law—recognize that freedom of the press is an important factor in development and the press itself is an indispensable tool for observing and guaranteeing individual liberties.

According to Yéro Amel N’Diaye, however, “today the problem is far from the recognition of freedom of the press, but its effective guarantee.” Instead of being free, journalists are subjected to pressures of all kinds. The censorship regime has been replaced by a regime of imprisonment. Journalists are pulled between several parties, each wanting to use the media for its own benefit. On a more positive note, Freedom House’s 2007 *Freedom of the Press* report on Mauritania notes that the new law provides for protection of journalists’ sources.

Before the coup of August 3, 2005, panelists asserted that no objective criteria were observed when assigning licenses to media. As a result, the newspapers that were licensed were more preoccupied with promoting the government’s image abroad than with providing reliable news to citizens at home.

A supervisory body called the High Authority for the Press and Broadcasting (HAPA) was created in 2006 to regulate the media. According to Freedom House, HAPA has accepted applications for private radio and television licenses, but, to date, the government still has a monopoly on broadcast media. Freedom House also reports that three of the six members, including the body’s chair, are appointed by the president. It is unclear whether this will hurt the independence of HAPA. However, according to Reporters Without Borders’ (RSF) 2008 Annual Report on Mauritania, HAPA did condemn an attack by guards of the prime minister on Radio Mauritania journalist Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Moghdad. According to RSF, HAPA said, “No circumstances

can justify resorting to physical force against a journalist doing their job.” Certainly, such a response is encouraging.

Regarding the tax structure for the media, according to Freedom House, private newspapers enjoy a VAT exemption, granted by the 2006 Ordinance, on all inputs needed for publishing.

Panelists did not discuss specific incidences of attacks on journalists in the recent past. The International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) reported a number of incidences of harassment and two cases of assaults on journalists in 2007. As security personnel working for the prime minister and the first lady perpetrated these assaults, the government took no legal action. In one case, attempts to file a complaint were dropped by the journalist after an official apology was made.

The public media receive preferential legal treatment in that they enjoy a monopoly on broadcasting and they have very easy access to public information. Private media face almost a total lack of information coming from public authorities.

Withholding information is still a serious handicap for the private press in Mauritania. Panelists did note that some government officials are likely gun shy and “have their own reasons to shut up,” given the less than objective treatment they sometimes receive precisely in those newspapers to which they provided information in the past. Panelists agreed that more or less beneficial arrangements have been made here and there to allow private newspapers to access information. In these cases, according to

LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

panelists, information is mostly provided for political or other non-transparent reasons. Panelists felt strongly that stonewalling must be fought so that the private media can have equal access to public information and be able to perform their duty of informing citizens on issues that concern them. Furthermore, panelists said that not being able to access information is a handicap to their profession, as they are not able to correctly report facts.

Speaking about libel and defamation, Mamadou Thiam, a journalist with *Le Calame*, stated "The whole legal framework sometimes used for the deterrence of defamation takes precedence over the guarantees offered by the law." In general, according to panelists, offenses are solved by privately negotiated settlements; therefore punishment is virtually non-existent. Nonetheless, bearing out Thiam's point, journalists are often detained for short periods of time over issues of libel and defamation. And, according to an IFEX report dated November 9, 2007, a journalist for the private newspaper *al-Aqsa* was sentenced to a one-year jail term for accusing a businessman of involvement in drug trafficking. Also reporting on this case, RSF noted that a €1 million fine was imposed as well, but that the journalist was out of the country and not serving time.

Panelists did not disagree with the need for libel laws. They said that, instead of accusing others, journalists must take responsibility when any news they produce may end up hurting someone.

No laws exist preventing media from accessing international news sources.

Regarding registration of journalists, panelists did not provide comment. However, Freedom House reports that registration exists, and that the Ordinance on the Printed Press changed the ministry in charge of this from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Justice. No evidence exists that this is used to effectively bar critical journalists from practicing.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.31

Professional journalism in Mauritania has a long way to go despite the good intentions of some media professionals. In particular, pay levels for journalists need to be improved in order to help stem corrupt practices. The low score for Indicator 5 and panelists' many comments on this matter reflected this. On the positive side, Mauritania does not suffer from a lack of news at the expense of entertainment, as evidenced by the high score in Indicator 6.

It is clear from the panelists' discussion that the lack of professionalism is the thorn in the side of Mauritania's fledgling press and respect for ethics remains shaky. These problems stem from the fact that editorial rooms have been flooded with people lacking any real qualification or experience. The panel felt that editors must stress the importance of ethics so that adhering to them becomes reflexive for journalists in their everyday reporting.

Regarding self-censorship, panelists noted that in some cases, newspapers are controlled by businessmen, which inevitably limits the freedom of the outlet. The US State Department reports that journalists self-censor on stories related to Shari'a law those that would be considered critical of foreign embassies.

While recognizing the efforts made by newsrooms to produce quality articles, to stick to the news and deal with real issues in the country, the panelists expressed their dissatisfaction with the treatment of events by the media. There is often a tremendous temptation to favor political news at the expense of other areas. In fact, they noted, some newspapers only appear when crucial political events take place, such as elections.

The salaries of journalists working in the private sector are simply insignificant and they provide no social coverage, such as pension and health benefits. Therefore, journalists are not insulated from corruption, which is a widespread scourge in Mauritania. The quality and objectivity of their work necessarily suffers. The general conditions with respect to this profession are not encouraging, and only the staunchest believers in journalistic integrity resist the temptation to engage in "envelope journalism."

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

However, the journalists working with the public sector enjoy both better professional training and acceptable salaries.

Regarding equipment, panelists reported that the resources available to journalists are not particularly helpful.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.43

Mauritania enjoys plurality of news sources only in print media, which is not widely available outside of cities and not printed in languages other than Arabic and French. In particular, a low score in Indicator 5, private broadcast media produce their own news, hurt the score for this objective.

Plurality of news sources is limited by the on-going government monopoly on broadcast media. Panelists did note with satisfaction the large number of private print media to supplement state-owned newspapers. However, while there are more than 700 registered newspapers and other periodicals, only about 20 appear with regularity. These are concentrated in cities. Panelists noted that the economic environment in remote inland provinces does not support print media.

The panelists concluded that the public media have not yet achieved the level of equitable news reporting. Speaking about that, Mamdou Sarr, secretary-general of the National Forum of Human Rights Defense Organizations, noted, "News on television and radio [both public monopolies] is not equitable. Apart from information, these media also convey

the country's culture and so more shows in the national languages are needed. The TV and radio are discriminatory."

On a positive note, RSF monitoring of Mauritanian radio and television during the 2007 presidential elections found that public broadcasting, with oversight from HAPA, did comply with the election law's provisions for equitable access by, and coverage of, all candidates.

There is no independent news agency in Mauritania. State-run Mauritanian News Agency (AMI) offers news for a fee to local media. According to its web site, AMI has offices in 12 provincial capitals. It also offers a mobile telephone compatible news service.

Finally, the panelists thought that the languages in which the news is published are not accessible to the entire population. They felt that the use of national languages must be increased to support pluralism. That is why Kissima Diagana, with *La Tribune*, said, "Citizens' access to news is still very limited. Instead of talking about the languages of the minorities it would be fairer to use the term of national languages. The different nationalities have no access to news to the extent that the news is not translated in their languages. They are largely disconnected from current events and the very few existing weekly shows cannot change that."

The participants admitted that the public broadcast media have made important progress concerning the Moor community in terms of the quality of programming and diversity of viewpoints. This prompted Addahi ould saleck dit Weddou, of *Nouadhibou Info*, to say "The progress that has been made is much more tangible for those belonging to the Arab culture in Mauritania. Which is to say that access to news is limited to a small part of the population." Following up on this point, the panelists pointed out that the black African nationalities have not experienced significant progress to date in terms of sharing programming and airtime in their own languages in the scheduling of the—so far—exclusively public broadcast media.

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Mauritania Objective Score: 0.86

Most indicators scored poorly in this objective, reflecting an under-developed business environment generally and lack of business culture in the private media specifically. Indicator 5, private media do not receive subsidies, finished well ahead of the average and shows that private media are not financially reliant on the government to the detriment of their editorial independence. Nonetheless, panelists felt that

some government help under the circumstances would be appreciated by the media.

While the panelists lauded the large number of private print outlets, they noted, however, that this is not indicative of a lucrative industry. To the contrary, the private media in Mauritania are rather unprofitable. This situation is due to a number of factors. Newspaper management has been highly informal to date. The advertising market is only accessible if one has connections and well-placed friends. Newspapers often lack any kind of management and marketing staff, which is a serious handicap for efficient operations.

The panelists said that newspapers do not have equal access to advertising markets. The very few contracts from advertising companies with newspapers are often made for non-transparent reasons. This results in advertising deals and contracts not being made with full disclosure, as they should be. The reliability of any news reports concerning potential problems with the companies that do advertise may well be compromised as a result of influence gained through advertising. Furthermore company owners or the managers of public and private institutions hesitate to purchase advertising from newspapers that are considered critical of the government.

Panelists felt that in such circumstances, for the good of the media journalists must own stock in their own company, just as they need to become specialized within their newsrooms.

Panelists report that the government does not grant subsidies to private media and most newspapers are forced to rely exclusively on their own financing and revenue. Many newspapers have ceased publication for years for lack of sufficient funds. According to the panelists, this situation reflects the fact that the government has no interest in the viability of the media.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.36

The scoring of this objective revealed a mixture of several weaknesses and a few relative strengths. Indicators 1, 2, 4, and 5, covering trade and professional associations, academic journalism programs, and short-term training, scored low. This implies that in the fairly short time the Mauritanian media has experienced an open environment, they have not yet had the chance to establish key supporting institutions. However, Indicator 3, NGOs supporting the media, scored relatively well, as did Indicators 6 and 7, access to printing facilities and newsprint and apolitical distribution networks.

According to the panelists, press associations have no significant role in either the protection of the industry's interests or professional improvement. The press associations that used to exist or are still active were created at the initiative of the government with the mission of protecting its own interests. Therefore, the many organizations that identify themselves as professional associations make no effort, in reality, to improve the status and conditions of journalists or the media.

Panelists see in this void a wasted opportunity. They said that professional journalists do not share their experience with others who need to acquire new skills or improve the ones that they already possess. Instead of "wasting" their time training others, the more experienced journalists would rather go out and earn their own living.

However, in the case of NGO support of the media, panelists acknowledged the important supporting role played by human rights NGOs currently active in Mauritania. Mamadou Sarr, secretary general of the National Forum of Human Rights Defense Organizations, stated, "They work full-time for the protection and guarantee of freedom of the press. This fight is an integral part of their mission."

Speaking about the recruitment of private journalists, Mamoudou Sy of *L'Eveil-Hebdo* stated, "Most editorial staff will go to universities and recruit students with compatible majors for the profession. They provide them with on-the-job training and sometimes send them off to small practice seminars and workshops so they improve their skills as they go." There is no academic journalism program in Mauritania.

Regarding short-term and in-service training, Kissima Diagana with *La Tribune* said "The journalists with degrees do not provide others with the training they need to acquire new

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

knowledge or improve the knowledge that they already possess.” Most journalists are self-taught. The vast majority of journalists have never attended a professional training class and the presence of qualified journalists around them has not had any real influence on their own training. Panelists stressed an urgent need to set up an in-service training plan that could help to improve the overall quality of newsrooms. While some training seminars have already been organized, their brevity and the methods used—too theoretical, according to the panelists—did not end up considerably improving the quality of journalists’ performance.

No newspaper owns its own printing press; the government printing facility and some private companies print most newspapers. There is only one media distribution network (MAPECI) in the capital. Most newspapers no longer employ its services, as they prefer to use itinerant sellers or set up kiosks.

List of Panel Participants

Thiam Mamadou, journalist, *Le Calame*, Nouakchott

Kissima Diagana, journalist, *La Tribune*, Nouakchott

Yéro Amel N’Diaye, journalist, The Friends of Culture Club, Nouakchott

Wane Aboubecrine, correspondent, *Rosso Eveil Hebdo*, Rosso

Mountagua Diop, sports journalist, *L’Eveil-Hebdo*, Boghé

Youssouf Bâ, journalist, *L’Essor* Newspaper, Kaédi

Rokhaya Tall, lawyer, Mauritanian Women’s Rights Association, Nouakchott

Mamadou Sarr, secretary general, National Forum of the Human Rights Defense Organizations, Nouakchott

Baba Dianfa Traoré, investigation department head, *Horizons*, Nouakchott

Addahi Weddou, journalist, *Nouadhibou Info*, Nouadhibou

Alassane Sow, sales representative, Newspaper Distribution Service, Nouakchott

Birome Guèye, editor-in-chief, *L’Eveil-Hebdo*, Nouakchott

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