



Mauritania Country Report 2023

In 1960, Mauritania achieved independence from France, beginning nationhood as an authoritarian, one-party state. After several coups and two constitutions, Mauritania saw its first peaceful transfer of power after the 2019 presidential election. Political conflict and socioeconomic problems plague the country. Over half of the population lives in extreme poverty. The most serious human rights problem is the persistence of slavery.

The people of Mauritania are divided into [three groups](#): the Bidhans, of mixed Arab-Berber descent, who hold all the power in Mauritania; the Haratins, descendants of freed black slaves once owned by Bidhans, who still face [slave-like conditions](#); and black ethnic groups – the Halpulaar, Soninké, Wolof, and Bambara – who, like the Haratins, are subject to racial discrimination. Although ethnic conflict in Mauritania is complex, broadly, the Bidhans subordinate Haratins and black ethnic groups. The Bidhans still enslave black Mauritians. Mauritania is among the last countries that tolerates slavery.

Black Mauritians suffered [genocidal massacres](#) in the 1980s and 1990s, when tens of thousands of black Mauritians were forcibly deported from the country. Hundreds were detained, tortured, and killed in a state-sponsored effort to eradicate black culture in the country. A border dispute between Senegal and Mauritania in the Senegal River Valley led to armed conflict.

Mauritania claimed that black Mauritians are actually Senegalese who fraudulently obtained Mauritanian documentation. Blacks were deported by the Mauritanian government on the pretext of national security. Over 500 black Africans were executed. Their land was confiscated and given to Bidhans. While there was [no “grand plan”](#) to eliminate all black Mauritians, the government used the border war to commit genocidal massacres in an attempt to Arabize the country.

Although mass deportations of black Mauritians ended in the 1990s, they still face persecution today. Over [90,000](#) are still enslaved, despite the legal abolition of slavery in 1981. Slavery was not officially criminalized in Mauritania until 2007.

The government denies the continued existence of slavery. Very few people have been prosecuted under Mauritania’s anti-slavery laws. Even free Haratins are subordinated by slave-owning Bidhans. In the [2023 parliamentary elections](#), the People’s Progressive Alliance, which represents Haratin freed slave interests, lost all its seats in the National Assembly.

Lacking legal remedies for human rights violations, black Mauritians represent a permanent underclass in Mauritanian society. They are [consistently dehumanized and denied their human rights](#).

Due to its subordination of black Mauritians, Genocide Watch considers Mauritania as being at **Stage 3: Discrimination, Stage 4: Dehumanization, Stage 6: Polarization, and Stage 8: Persecution**.

Genocide Watch recommends:

- The Mauritanian government must prosecute slaveowners and enforce anti-slavery laws.
- Mauritania should promote genuine emancipation of former slaves and equalize access to education and economic resources.
- Mauritania should invest in state and religious initiatives to promote ethnic reconciliation.