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# The Politics of Mauritania

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## Introduction

Mauritania, officially known as the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, occupies a unique place in the political landscape of Northwest Africa. Since gaining independence from France in 1960, it has navigated a complex, often turbulent, path marked by both progress and persistent challenges. The nation's history is one of remarkable contrasts: a predominantly desert land with ancient cultural roots, yet a society grappling with modern issues of governance and social transformation.

This book, "The Politics of Mauritania: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Mauritania," seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the country's political system, examining its structure, historical development, key actors, and the principal challenges it faces today. Through twenty-five chapters, we chart the evolution of Mauritania's political institutions — from colonial legacies and one-party rule to multiple military coups, constitutional reforms, and gradual democratic openings. Special attention is given to the enduring influence of the military, the concentration of executive authority, and the often delicate balance between tradition, religion, and modernity.

Understanding Mauritania's politics requires engaging with the country's diverse societal fabric, shaped by ethnicity, tribe, and religion. The interplay between Moorish, Black African, and Haratin communities, alongside the persistent, though legally abolished, practice of slavery, has deeply informed the structures and functions of its state. The complex realities of discrimination and underrepresentation continue to challenge the legitimacy and inclusivity of the political system.

At the same time, Mauritania's rich natural resources, notably in iron ore and fisheries, have the potential to transform the nation's socioeconomic landscape. Yet, issues of corruption, inequalities, and insufficient political representation often hinder sustainable development and equitable growth. Despite repeated promises of reform, the rule of law, independence of the judiciary, and the efficacy of civil society organizations remain under strain.

Recent years, however, have also witnessed significant moments of promise, particularly with the peaceful transfer of presidential power in 2019, which many view as a major step forward in the country's democratic evolution. The persistence of multiparty politics, the growing but still constrained voice of civil society, and the navigation of regional security threats underscore Mauritania's ongoing capacity for adaptation and resilience.

This introduction serves as a gateway to the deep, layered political story of Mauritania

— one that invites readers to grasp the forces shaping its present and future. By unpacking the country's past and present, challenges and opportunities, and actors both old and new, this book aims to serve as an authoritative yet accessible guide to Mauritania's political system, realities, and prospects.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Land and People of Mauritania

Mauritania is a country of vast, often forbidding, landscapes and a population whose identity is deeply intertwined with this challenging environment. Situated in Northwest Africa, it serves as a geographical and cultural bridge, connecting the Arab Maghreb to the north with the sub-Saharan Africa to the south. This transitional zone has shaped both the physical terrain and the diverse ethnic makeup of the nation.

Covering an expansive area of over a million square kilometers, Mauritania is the eleventh-largest country in Africa. Its sheer size is deceptive, however, as approximately 90% of its territory is consumed by the Sahara Desert. This makes it one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world. The landscape is predominantly flat, characterized by arid plains, occasionally punctuated by dramatic ridges and cliff-like rock formations. A series of southwest-facing scarps longitudinally bisect the central plains, separating sandstone plateaus, such as the Adrar Plateau. Isolated, mineral-rich peaks, known as Guelbs and Kedias, rise above these plateaus. The most prominent of these is the concentric Guelb er Richat, sometimes called the "Eye of the Sahara," a striking geological formation in the north-central region. Kediet ej Jill, standing at over 900 meters, is the country's highest point and is located near the city of Zouïrât. To the northeast, the plateaus gradually descend into the vast, barren expanse of El Djouf, the "Empty Quarter," a region of enormous sand dunes that merges seamlessly into the larger Sahara. Along the coast, between the ocean and the plateaus, the terrain alternates between flat, clayey plains and shifting sand dunes, constantly sculpted by the wind.

The climate is, predictably, predominantly hot and dry, reflecting the country's location within the Sahara and Sahel regions. Average annual temperatures range from 21°C to 30°C, with the south-east experiencing higher temperatures and the northern coast being slightly cooler due to the influence of the Atlantic. Rainfall is scarce, particularly in the northern two-thirds of the country, where annual precipitation is less than 100 millimeters. The southern part of the country, however, falls within the Sahelian zone and experiences a short rainy season from July to September, with average annual rainfall reaching 500 to 600 millimeters in the far south. The prevailing wind is the harmattan, a hot, dry, and often dust-laden wind that blows from the Sahara, especially strong from late November to mid-March, bringing with it significant amounts of sand and dust. Diurnal temperature variations can be extreme in the Saharan zone, with significant differences between daytime highs and nighttime lows.

This arid environment profoundly impacts the vegetation, which is sparse and adapted to the lack of water. Belts of natural vegetation, corresponding to the rainfall patterns,

stretch from east to west. Along the Sénégal River in the south, there are traces of tropical forest, giving way to brush and savanna in the southeast. The central and northern regions are dominated by sandy desert with limited plant life. Drought has been a significant factor, leading to the expansion of the desert since the mid-1960s.

Despite the challenging environment, Mauritania is endowed with significant natural resources. It boasts extensive deposits of iron ore, which are a major export and a crucial part of the economy. Other mineral resources include gold, copper, gypsum, and phosphate rock, and there is ongoing exploration for tantalum, uranium, crude oil, and natural gas. The country's coastline is also recognized as one of the richest fishing grounds in the world, offering substantial economic potential.

The population of Mauritania is relatively small, estimated at around 5 million people in 2024, making it one of the least densely populated countries globally with about 5 inhabitants per square kilometer. A significant portion of the population, over 60%, lives in urban areas, with roughly a third concentrated in the capital city, Nouakchott, located on the Atlantic coast.

Mauritanian society is characterized by its multiethnic composition, a result of centuries of migration and interaction between Arab-Berber populations from the north and various ethnic groups from sub-Saharan Africa. This has created a complex social structure. The two largest groups are the Moors, who constitute more than two-thirds of the population. Within the Moorish population, there is a historical division between the Bidhan, or "white Moors," who are of Arab and Amazigh (Berber) descent, and the Haratin, or "black Moors," who have Sudanic African origins and were historically enslaved by the Bidhan. Despite this historical context of enslavement, both Bidhan and Haratin share the same language and culture, speaking the Hassaniya dialect of Arabic.

The remaining portion of the population is comprised of various sub-Saharan ethnic groups, including the Tukulor, who primarily inhabit the Sénégal River valley, the Fulani, dispersed throughout the south, the Soninke, living in the extreme south, and the Wolof, found in the vicinity of Rosso in southwestern Mauritania. These groups have maintained their distinct languages, which are part of the Niger-Congo family, such as Fula, Soninke, and Wolof. While Arabic is the official language, Fula, Soninke, and Wolof are recognized as national languages.

The distribution of the population is heavily influenced by the climate and geography. The majority of Mauritians live in the more temperate south, along the Senegal River valley and in the Sahelian zone, where agricultural possibilities are greater. Historically, a large proportion of the population was nomadic, but recurrent droughts have driven many to urban centers.

Understanding the political landscape of Mauritania requires an appreciation of this

intricate interplay between geography, climate, and the diverse ethnic and social groups that inhabit the country. The vastness of the desert, the concentration of population in the south and in urban areas, and the historical and ongoing dynamics between the different communities all contribute to the unique challenges and opportunities that shape Mauritanian politics.

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