
Mauritians elected a new president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, in March 2007. These elections were considered to be transparent by international observers. However, he was overthrown by a military coup on August 6, 2008 after only 15 months in office.



MAURITANIA

Ruled by a single party regime from 1965 to 1978, Mauritania has been through multiple coups and dubious elections especially under the regime of Colonel Maouyaa Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya. He took power after a coup in 1984 and was reelected three times beginning with the first pluralist elections in 1992. His overthrow on August 3, 2005 by the Conseil Militaire pour la Justice et la Démocratie¹ was a turning point for the nation. During the 19-month military transition, a series of legislative and municipal elections were organized to give the country new democratic institutions. The constitution, adopted on July 20, 1991, was amended and submitted to referendum in June 2006. The presidential term is now limited to five years and is renewable once.

Mauritanians elected a new president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, in March 2007. These elections were considered to be transparent by international observers. However, he was overthrown by a military coup on August 6, 2008 after only 15 months in office. Since then, General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, Abdallahi's former private chief of staff, has taken on the responsibilities of president. The final report of the États généraux de la démocratie² (EGD) sent on January 5, 2009 to the junta government promised a return to constitutional order by the following semester, including new presidential elections planned for June 6, 2009.

Passage of order no. 91-023 on July 25, 1991 signaled the emergence of a truly independent Arabic- and French-speaking press. This was used by public authorities as a means of repression, however, as the ministry of the interior required that independent publications be submitted for authorization and censorship prior to publication. The transitional regime abolished this order, signaling the beginning of a new era for the press and the entire media sector. The creation of the Commission nationale consultative pour la réforme de la presse et de l'audiovisuel³ (CNCRPA) by Prime Minister Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar on December 15, 2005 breathed new life into this decaying sector.

CNCRPA examined Mauritania's media and proposed the creation of a legal and institutional framework favorable to the development of the press in a constitutional state. Thanks to these reforms, the Mauritanian media sector is now governed by order no. 017-2006 on freedom of the press issued in October 2006 (repealing order no. 91-023). The new, more liberal law decriminalized press offenses, abolished censorship, and authorized the publication of newspapers based on a simple statement of intent. Article 31 of this law introduced a state subsidy for the press and created a media regulatory institution, the Haute autorité de la presse et de l'audiovisuel⁴ (HAPA), in October 2006.

¹ Military Board for Justice and Democracy

² Democratic Convention

³ National Advisory Committee for the Press and Audio-Visual Reform

⁴ Higher Press and Broadcast Authority

MAURITANIA AT A GLANCE

MAURITANIA AT A GLANCE

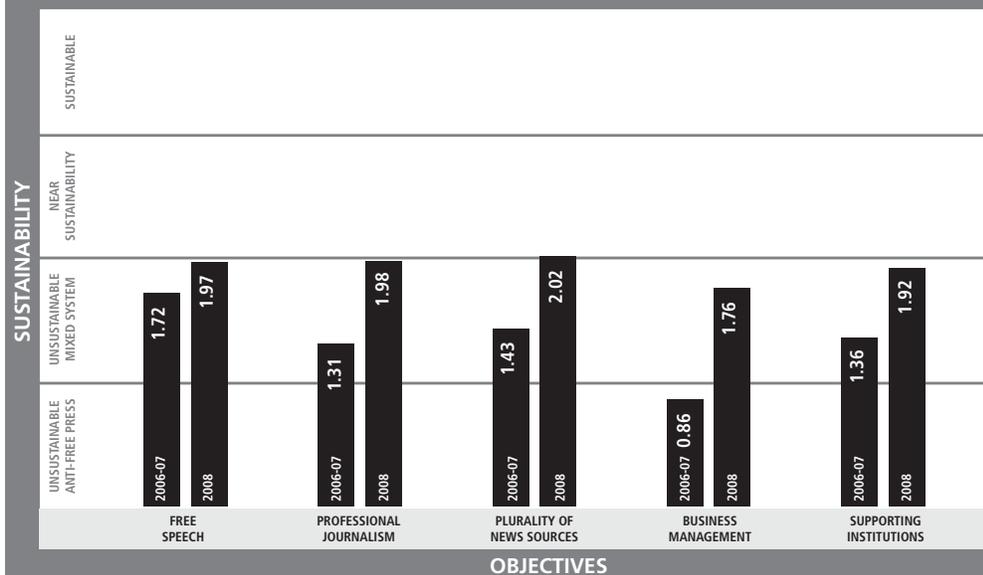
> General

- > **Population:** 3,129,486 (July 2009 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 (2008-Atlas):** \$2.636 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **GNI per capita (2008-PPP):** \$2,000 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **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: 42 regular titles (15 daily newspapers and twenty weekly newspapers and other periodicals); Radio: 3 (*Radio Mauritanie*, FM Nouadhibou, FM Radio Jeunes in Nouakchott). No private radio stations; Television: 2 public channels (TVM and TVM 2 Plus). No private television channel
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Top four by circulation: *Le Calame*, *L'Éveil Hebdo*, *La Tribune*, *L'Authentique*,
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Mauritanian News Agency, Agence Nouakchott d'Information
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** N/A
- > **Internet usage:** 30,000 (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: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.97

In a previously unreleased document reported in the weekly newspaper *Le Calame* (no. 667, December 17, 2008), former President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi said freedom of speech during his 15 months in office was “positive,” adding, “The right to free speech and opinion has been strengthened.”

In turn, Mohamed El Hacen Ould El Hadj, a senator close to the putschists, said in an interview published in the same newspaper (no. 668, December 24, 2008), that the former president was wrong to speak about “total freedom of the press while his own daughter (Amal Mint Cheikh Abdallahi, a member of the President’s communication office) used—and abused—every public coercion tool available to regulate editorial policies.”

According to the daily newspaper *Nouakchott Info* (no. 1640, December 31, 2008), Mauritania’s economy and the state of freedom of expression declined during the 2007-2008 period corresponding to the rise to power of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. Media and economic organizations blamed this decline on two factors: governmental corruption and the mismanagement of public funds. In 2007, the Heritage Foundation’s economic freedom index ranked Mauritania 126th (compared to 103rd in 2006). Despite calls for freedom of speech and media liberalization, Reporters Without Borders pointed out this decline in its 2007-2008 report; in fact, Mauritania was ranked 50th in 2006 but fell to 105th in the current report.

The panelists recognized that Abdallahi’s rise to power in 2007 was itself a historical event. For the first time, the Mauritanian president met with a group of five publication managers including the managers of *Éveil Hebdo*, *Le Calame*, and *Biladi* during the first anniversary of his inauguration. The president’s communications office also implemented a rotational system designed to include independent journalists in his delegations abroad.

According to Mamoudou Sy, the MSI moderator and publication manager of *L’Éveil Hebdo*, “Progress was made but it did not always go in the direction that the media professionals expected. In 20 years, no journalist from *L’Éveil* or any other local independent publication had been invited to a political debate on public radio. This became possible again when he entered.”

Birome Guèye, a member of HAPA responded, “There are some hindrances to the freedom of speech that show the

undeclared will of the regime to conjure up the demons of the past, for example the successive arrests of journalists or the disappearance of the citizen radio station in the second half of 2007.”

“It was an auspicious time for the freedom of speech but the political will of the authorities to restrict the freedom of the press was still looming in the shadows,” said journalist Thiam Mamadou of the weekly newspaper *Le Calame*.

On August 6, 2008, the High Council of State, consisting of 11 officers and led by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, took power in Mauritania. The panelists felt that the coup halted advances in freedom of the press by overthrowing the democratically elected President Abdallahi. In the aftermath of the coup, the future of Mauritania was the main headline in a number of local newspapers. The daily *Biladi* mentioned the international isolation that Mauritania risked as well as “to appear, for the first time in its history, as a plague-stricken country,” while the European Union threatened to freeze humanitarian aid for the country.

Le Calame wrote that abandoning Mauritania to its own fate was not a good idea and denounced the “disastrous” coup. In turn, the governmental daily newspaper, *Horizons*, dedicated much of its space to cover demonstrations and movements of support for the military, interpreting them as “a sign that Mauritians back the movement for change” (August 6, 2008).

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.

Mauritanian Television (TVM), public radio, the Agence mauritanienne d'information (AMI) and HAPA have always been under the control of whoever is in power. This became apparent in the aftermath of the military coup by the first changes made by the military regarding the public news outlets. The managers of TVM and public radio were accused of airing a communiqué announcing that the four main army joint chiefs of staff were dismissed by the overthrown president. Because of this, the managers of Radio Mauritania and TVM, Kaber Ould Hamoudi and Hamoud Ould M'Hamed respectively, were dismissed on August 7. Less than a week later on August 11, the general manager of AMI, Dicko Soudani, also suffered the wrath of the military. Ten days later, HAPA Chairman Idoumou Ould Mohamed Lemine was replaced by former journalist, minister of communications, and ambassador Mohamed Haibetna Ould Sidi Haiba.

According to Guèye, "It has become a tradition to endorse a coup by first neutralizing the radio and television in order to air communiqués more easily. It has become almost natural for each new regime to bring in their executives and managing teams."

The panelists added, "no civil regime can blame the military for 'arbitrary' dismissals. Three months after his 2007 inauguration, the overthrown president himself had dismissed, in the cabinet meeting of June 27, the general manager of Radio Mauritania, Mohamed Yahya Ould Haye. Incomprehensible dismissal?"

Le Calame wrote: "at the last meeting on June 21, the station's board of directors had congratulated Ould Haye for his excellent work, including the improvement of the programming and his management of the public outlet. From the minutes of that meeting it can be seen that the board of directors was satisfied with the results of the budgetary audit conducted on May 31, which shows a general receipt rate of 45.92 percent and an expense rate of 19.43 percent."

The journalists also raised doubts about the independence of the managers appointed at the top of the public media outlets and institutions by the political authorities. The fact that legislation enabling HAPA's self-regulatory mission to appoint managers of the public radio and television stations was not put into practice constituted a major handicap for the media. Idoumou Ould Mohamed Lemine was appointed chairman of HAPA on July 31, 2008, one week before the coup. Lemine, a close friend and former head adviser of the overthrown president in charge of communications, did not even have time to be sworn in and fully take on his new position. The junta dismissed him for the "offense of belonging" to the same political family as Abdallahi.

"By appointing a very politically known personality to head HAPA, the political powers desired to secure the control of the public media," said Addahi Weddou, correspondent for *La Lumière du Nord*. He added, "To guarantee the independence of an institution such as HAPA it is imperative to reexamine the mechanism of appointment of its chairman and nine members."

Until now, the mechanism for appointing the chairman and members of HAPA has excluded the civil society, protection organizations, and socio-professional associations of journalists. The chairman of HAPA is appointed by presidential decree and placed under the authority of the president of the republic. Three of the nine members are chosen by the president, three by the president of the National Assembly, and three by the president of the Senate.

According to Sy, "it is hard to preserve one's independence from the political powers if one owes one's appointment to them. The president of Mauritania holds the power to appoint and revoke the managers of the public media. We are not yet with the right person in the right place type of situation!"

The way in which political authorities appoint managers of the public media strongly influences the very content of the media, the panelists contended. In the five months following the coup, the TVM programs were heavily criticized by the opposition and independent personalities who identified a return to "monolithism," i.e., showing only images of pro-junta demonstrations, conducting a media campaign against the fallen president and his family, etc. *Biladi* reported that Radio Mauritania "handpicked their invited guests, avoided any contradictory debate especially on political issues, and conducted a laudatory pro-coup discourse."

During *Tahta Dhawé (Point of Light)*, the first live political debate since the military coup hosted by TVM, former minister Isselmou Ould Abdel Kader defended a communitarian doctrine saying, "The Moorish community represents a danger for Mauritania." He also stated that Mauritania's recent military coups left 164 victims within the Moorish community. Finally, he called the Presidential Security Battalion a "militia" filled with "foreign" elements.

On October 9, 2008, three days after that debate, Imam Cheikh Ould Ely, chief executive officer of the public television, appointed 65 days earlier by the ruling military junta, was dismissed. He was replaced by Mohamed Yahya Ould Haye, a former journalist and radio manager who had been dismissed by former president Abdallahi in June 2007. The show's host, Sidi Ould Lemjab, was also fired.

No official explanation was given in justification of the government's decision.

HAPA reacted to the "Isselmou Ould Abdel Kader Affair" in a communiqué issued on October 16 stating that it would not "hesitate to deal severely with any acts of ostracism and offenses against the journalism ethics rules, while regretting the serious verbal loss of control that occurred during the live show." HAPA explained, "The public media must open up to all voices in the public life of the nation and observe the principles of pluralism and diversity of opinion." The media regulating institution issued no comment about the dismissal of the TVM manager and the show host.

Then on October 22, 2008, the TVM manager and the show host were arrested and interrogated by the national police and released. On the same day, after the minister of defense filed a complaint against Kader, the latter was accused and imprisoned for having refused to present a public apology on national television.

This affair brought to light prosecution based on personal beliefs and the aversion of the public media to public debate, and generated numerous reactions from the panelists as well as civil society. "I believe the television manager was ambushed by the special conditions of live broadcasting and perhaps a little bit by the unpredictability of his guest who is known to be a trouble-making free thinker," said Guèye.

In a communiqué made public on October 25, the Forum National des Organisations de défense des Droits de l'Homme⁵ requested "the immediate and unconditional release of Kader, whose only crime was to have expressed his point of view in a television talk show." The organization pointed out that the arrest of Kader was part of the "suppression of individual and collective liberties in Mauritania since the coup of August 6, 2008."

After public media failed to open debate, TVM's new show called *Club de la démocratie*⁶ brought together opposition representatives and people close to the ruling military junta on December 26, 2008. The panelists believed that this new overture was "dictated by the immediate political agenda" inasmuch as it coincided with the EGD held from December 27, 2008 to January 5, 2009. This meeting was designed to find a way out of the post-coup crisis, not of "a true wish to open up the public national television to a diversity of opinions."

According to Mountaga Diop, regional correspondent of *L'Éveil-Hebdo in Boghé*, "This second overture of the public media cannot really hide the intentions of the TVM

managers and the new military power in Nouakchott." Overthrown president Abdallahi, freed on December 23, 2008, was not allowed to speak on public television but was able to appear on the Pan-Arab satellite channel, Al-Arabiya, and addressed the nation saying he was still its sole legitimate representative.

Assessing the status of the freedom of speech in the first five months of the new military government, Sy said, "No major impeding of the private press and no journalist arrests were recorded. But the public media has been under strong pressure as many media managers have been dismissed and HAPA has had to issue a number of calls to order."

In February 2008, journalist and publication manager of the Arabic language newspaper *Al Aqsa Abdel Vettah* Ould Abeidna was convicted of "false accusations" by the magistrate's court of Nouakchott and sentenced to one year in prison and a 300 million UM fine. The court's decision was confirmed in an appeal on November 7, 2007 and Ould Abeidna sought refuge in Dubai. Businessman Ould Bouamatou filed a complaint. In 2007, large quantities of cocaine were seized in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott. Ould Abeidna accused Ould Bouamatou of involvement in this large-scale international trafficking through Mauritania.

According to the panelists, this case reveals uneven judicial and ethical rules as well as overlapping provisions of new press law and those of the criminal code. Ould Abeidna was initially prosecuted for libel but the Supreme Court of Mauritania changed the charge to "false accusations," punishable by five months to two years in prison based on article 348 of the criminal code, thus bypassing HAPA, the only institution authorized to deliver an initial decision on libel before going to court.

On November 30, 2008, Ould Abeidna was extradited from Dubai to Nouakchott and imprisoned based on an international arrest warrant. The panelists felt that the extradition procedure had no legal basis and "goes against every journalist protection law principle and international convention."

Sy commented, "The former minister of justice under the 2005-2007 military transitional government, Ould Bettah, tried to implement the mechanisms of an independent and fair judicial system but unfortunately we are still far from a functional solution. The majority of the journalists wished to show their lack of solidarity with their fellow journalist as they believed that in fact he was used by a business lobby that had [something] to gain from attacking a rival, namely Ould Bouamatou. It does happen that businesspeople or politicians use journalists to settle their scores with a rival, even if that means they will have to tell lies about them."

⁵ National Forum for the Human Rights Organizations

⁶ Democracy Club

The panelists unanimously agreed that libel was, unfortunately, a common occurrence in the Mauritanian private press but said, "Regardless of the legitimate emotions generated by this affair the judge was wrong to give such a disproportionate sentence and fine with respect to the offense." They also lamented the determination of the courts to take possession of the files of the accused sometimes regardless of existing press law and international conventions for the protection of journalists.

The case of journalist Mohamed Ould Abdelatif and his boss, publication manager Mohamed Nema Oumar, arrested on July 21, 2008 from a libel complaint filed by three judges of the court of criminal appeals, was evidence to the panelists of the difficult cohabitation of the press and judiciary during 2008. Mohamed Ould Abdelatif wrote in the July issue of *Al-Houriya* that the three judges received MRO 25 million (\$100,000) from a defense attorney to release a businessman and a police officer accused of drug trafficking. He then said that they "are known for their vast experience in the field of corruption."

The real or assumed connivance between the representatives of the law and financial moguls, between journalists and business lobbies and the political authorities in Mauritania has created much turmoil. This tense, ambiguous and complex relationship lies at the heart of another legal complaint filed with a Dakar court for "libel, complicity of illegal detention, false declarations" and damaging the "honorability and dignity" of the former first lady of Mauritania, Khatou Mint El Boukhary.

On August 7, 2008, in the aftermath of the coup, businessman Baba Tandian gave an interview to his newspaper *Le Matin* calling the August 6 coup a "beneficial and healthy operation." Tandian also accused the former first lady of embezzling "XOF 30 to XOF 60 billion" (\$72 million to \$144 million) through her KB Foundation.

L'Éveil Hebdo detailed the strange ramification of this affair and wrote: "Score settling or a hidden fondness for the junta? The real reasons behind the attack by the printer Tandian, who took over most of the president's deals, on the former first lady are unknown. Some blame it on the filthy rich Mauritanian businessmen of the Oulad Bousba tribe who have long had close business relations with the multi-faced printer-businessman." In a November 2008 press conference in Nouakchott, the owner of the daily newspaper *Le Matin* was, according to local newspapers, "unyielding on the remarks that were attributed to him" in the Dakar newspaper.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.98

The panelists described the state of professional journalism by using the examples of various high-profile cases from the recent past. According to Yero Amel N'Diaye, an independent cultural journalist, the Ould Abeidna affair showed not only how stringent the reform of the profession had become but also highlighted a higher responsibility towards the journalists' rights and duties as well. "We must admit that Mauritanian journalists lack professionalism and tact and fall easy prey to all sorts of manipulation," he said. "All this often leads to biased and irreverent reporting." Although HAPA never had the chance to give its expert opinion in the case, Gueye (a HAPA member) passed a categorical judgment: "To accuse someone of drug trafficking without bringing forth evidence is not only a huge professional mistake but also a most serious accusation."

In another example, on November 5, 2008, a group called The Independent Press in Support of the High Council of State announced its support for the August 6 military coup in Mauritania and called for all national and international institutions to side with the "rectification movement." "It will always be a serious, incomprehensible, and unjustified decision for a public as well as a private media journalist to get in line with the people in combat boots," said Mame Sèye Diop, a *Walf fadjri* correspondent in Mauritania.

The next day, *L'Authentique* (no. 792, November 6, 2008) attacked the lining up of some fellow journalists from the independent press. Not that this was surprising, the

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).

newspaper mentioned, for this movement was constituted by “people ordinarily called Peshmergas” who “took advantage of the general’s visit” to a working-class neighborhood to “introduce himself and share his feelings for them.” Peshmergas, which means “interlopers,” is a term widely used by the entire Mauritanian media and even the Pan-African press.

After part of the private press swore allegiance to the new authorities, journalists and other professionals in the public media (AMI, Radio Mauritania, and TVM) announced their support for the “rectification movement” during a huge rally on November 10. The public media have a reputation of being well-educated, virtuous, and rigorous reporters, but smack of gratuitous propaganda in sheer dismissal of every deontological rule. According to a February 14, 1991 decree, their official mission is to “inform, educate, and entertain the Mauritanian public by broadcasting shows in compliance with the cultural, economic, and social development guidelines of the country.”

As Sy pointed out, “We must not lose sight of the fact that any type of power is corrupting! The press must act as a counter-weight and be in the vanguard and hold close its most precious asset: its freedom.”

The panelists unanimously recognized that corruption definitely existed in different forms, either as a temporary effect or a generalized practice in the Mauritanian press, but should not be considered as a symptom alone. In a communiqué made public on September 28, 2008, the Front national pour la défense de la démocratie⁷ (FNDD), a 13-party political coalition opposing the coup in Mauritania, denounced the scope and frequency of corruption and conscience-buying practices on a large scale among “politicians and journalists” in exchange for their support of the August 6 coup.

According to the communiqué, the foreign press correspondents and Mauritanian media professionals are directly concerned by this practice. Up to “MRO 15 million and luxury cars have been offered to those who agreed to side with the putschists.”

N’Diaye said, “Some people accepted this bribe quite easily, while others refused it obstinately. It is also true that some capitalize on their writings and write their articles by dictation. These serious breaches must be put in relation with the lack of a fundamental respect of deontology and professionalism but also with the precariousness of the journalists’ condition.”

⁷ National Front for the Defense of Democracy

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Mauritania Objective Score: 2.02

Mauritanians receive their news from diverse media sources like most of the world: newspapers, television, radio, Internet, cellular telephone, etc. According to the panelists, however, the national languages Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof are not nearly represented in news sources as those presented in Arabic and French.

Today there is only one private press agency in Mauritania, the Agence Nouakchott d’Information (ANI) owned by the Mauritanienne de la Presse, d’Édition, de Communication et d’Impression⁸ (MAPECI). It has no office in Mauritania outside of Nouakchott, but seems more or less well organized and functional. It has a dual Arabic- and French-speaking office and no less than 30 journalists and local correspondents.

Despite the anticipated liberalization of the sector, the national broadcast landscape only contains three public radio stations (Radio Mauritania and two FM stations, one in Nouakchott and the other in Nouadhibou) and two public television channels (TVM and TVM 2 Plus) whose official mission is to “inform, educate and entertain the Mauritanian public by broadcasting shows in compliance with the cultural, economic, and social development guidelines of the country.”

⁸ Mauritanian Press, Publishing, Communication and Printing Agency

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.

These face competition from notable Arabic and other satellite channels. In 2006, *Al Jazeera* opened an office in Nouakchott. Mauritanian political parties and other personalities are not welcomed by the official media and express themselves mostly on the Arabic channels. When the public media stayed away from the overthrown Mauritanian President Abdallahi, he addressed the nation on the pan-Arab satellite channel *Al-Arabiya* on December 23, 2008 after his release.

Access to sources is difficult and hazardous for journalists. Diop Moussa with the Nouakchott newspaper *Le Quotidien* pointed out that “every information source is under lockdown. Practically everyone—political parties, trade unions, NGOs, liberal professions, public or private companies, members of the parliament, mayors, politicians, and state institutions—glorifies the role of the press in a democratic state but none of them embodies this spirit.”

The only available access to official and administrative news sources by Mauritanian media professionals is often through use of new communication technologies, which have profoundly changed the face of the independent press. For some, technology represents a doorway to a plurality of sources while for others they are a threat to editorial independence.

Offering diversified, modern, interactive, and regularly updated content in real time, the new portals and news web sites concerning Mauritania, such as *Taquadoumy.com* and *Cridem.org*, are partially responsible for the antiquating of the traditional written press, according to the panelists. Newspapers’ “circulation is in a free-fall.”

Thiam Mamadou said, “The Cridem portal is now the real threat to and rival of the independent press. It steals articles from newspapers, and the larger advertisers in the country, namely *Mattel* and *Mauritel*, are scrambling for space.”

Hosted in France, Cridem has become a limited liability company (Cridem Communication with a capital of MRO 1 million (\$3700) since it opted in March 2008 for a virtual outsourcing in Mauritania with a relatively small team of local collaborators. A cross between a giant blog, a super-powerful news search engine, and a Web 2.0 (participative, interactive, collaborative) environment, this website provides Mauritanian users not only with information but also gives them the opportunity to share their information and publish articles and comments. Cridem also continually monitors the Mauritania-related Francophone news throughout the web.

Currently, most of the Mauritanian independent publications do not have websites. Cridem is controversial because it selects newspaper-made content without requesting prior authorization or providing financial compensation. N’Diaye

said, “The website does not help to develop the country, quite the contrary, it is a regular carry-all with no systems of value or news processing, no truth/false distinction. For Cridem, everything is the same: media-produced news, sites and Internet users. The consequence is that very often the deontology is overridden.”

The panelists unanimously admitted that newspapers still have a long life ahead of them considering the high price of local telephone calls, expensive installation costs for Internet connections, and the absence of an infrastructure. A survey conducted in October 2008 on the availability of DSL (256Kb) connections in 13 Arab countries showed that Mauritania provided the most expensive services, followed by Iraq.

Traditional newspaper companies have reacted not by creating commercial strategies but by calling for intervention by public authorities. Newspapers such as *Nouakchott Info* (www.nouakchottinfo.com) and *Le Calame* (www.lecalame.net) do not allow Cridem to republish their articles on their websites.

Thiam Mamadou with *Le Calame* explained, “Our newspaper would not sell so well if our major articles were published online by Cridem. We have finally decided to e-mail the newspaper in PDF format to our subscribers who request it.”

“The Regroupement de la Presse mauritanienne⁹ (RPM) should request that the public authorities provide the appropriate legislation on this matter,” Sy responded. “Cridem is successful because it takes advantage of a legislative vacuum in the online press area. It is time that the Mauritanian ministry of communications and lawmakers quickly and clearly define the condition of online press publishers and of the respective safeguards.”

Telecom operators *Mattel*, *Mauritel*, and *Chinguittel* will join Cridem to compete with traditional newspapers. Since 2006, AMI has offered a cell phone compatible “*Ami Mobiles*” service that keeps users informed of the latest national news. *Mattel* and *Mauritel* provide a similar 24-hour news service in partnership with the satellite channel *Al Jazeera*.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.76

A report drafted in 2006 during the military transition by the national advisory committee for the press and broadcast reform stated: “Strictly speaking there are no private press companies. The written press companies are purely informal organizations. Very few newspapers are officially published

⁹ Mauritanian Press Assembly

by established business companies (less than 10 titles). Most of them are not officially incorporated.”

The report went on to say that there is an “absence of a legislated definition of a press company, its collective responsibilities as a corporation and its commitment for its personnel. The lack of categorization [of press companies in] medium-sized or small companies entitling them to preferential loans from banks and credit companies” further deepens their precariousness.

According to a survey conducted by HAPA in January 2008, the situation of the private press is different with respect to many press outlets. The survey pointed out several weaknesses: “The lack of work contracts for the employees, no accounting departments, no shareholding system, no CNSS affiliation, lack of equipment, etc.”

Sy believed that the informal nature of the management and organization of press companies could be explainable by their relatively young age. “This press is less than 20 years old. The first newspapers appeared more out of personal ambitions than as a result of dedicated market research or feasibility.” Therefore, to pull the press out of its own precarious state entails, above all, to take up the challenge of dealing with the lack of true professionals. “New communication businesses or small press groups keep springing up but their business management is hiding in the shadows. And that management dictates their point of view.”

The panelists pointed out that other factors are at play: copy prices (MRO 200 (\$.75) for a weekly newspaper and MRO 100 (\$.35) for a daily newspaper) are still relatively high; the number of readers (only about half the population is literate) and the newspaper circulation are quite low. According to a

HAPA survey, the circulation varies between 500 and 1,500 copies in total for regular Arabic and French newspapers. In 2007 there were 200 titles, including about 40 regular ones (13 daily newspapers and more than 20 weekly newspapers and other periodicals). The lack of real distribution networks and the insignificant annual advertising receipts complete the list of handicaps for press outlets.

The Mauritanian independent press does not receive state subsidies. Financing and material support had been obtained through United Nations, French, German, and European Union partners. “The only form of subsidy was printing aid made possible by the German Cooperation Agency [GTZ] in 1992 to alleviate the newspaper printing costs,” Sy remarked.

Nevertheless, in February 2008, the minister of communications selected 40 newspapers to receive a state subsidy of MRO 95 million (\$350,000). On June 9, 2008, the European Union and Mauritania signed a financing contract in the amount of €1.5 million as part of a media support plan to help the written press and radio. The house of representatives was preparing to pass a law subsidizing the state press but “postponed” it due to the coming to power of the military junta on August 6.

The panelists believed that the status and situation of the public news outlets were in many ways not any better than those of the written private press. Articles appearing in private press often denounced the “disaffection of the public.” The propagandistic nature of these outlets was sometimes accused of “lack of innovation and adaptation” in the new global and commercial context of broadcast products; other times they were simply accused of blatant “bad management.”

Once a public industrial and commercial institution, Radio Mauritania has become a “public administrative institution” under the ministry of communications along with its sister organization, TVM. Decrees nos. 91-021 and 91-026 of February 14, 1991 stripped them of all commercial and industrial purpose and are now officially meant to “inform, educate and entertain the Mauritanian public by broadcasting shows in compliance with the cultural, economic, and social development guidelines of the country.” Each has an annual budget of almost MRO 1 billion (\$3.7 million) but they are fraught with difficulties.

Decree no. 91-028 defined AMI as a press agency and publisher of the governmental daily newspapers *Chaab* and *Horizons*. The report of the national advisory committee for the press and broadcast reform said it is vulnerable to many of the same challenges as those incurred by public radio and television.

INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Mauritania Objective Score: 1.92

On December 27, 2007, 20 owners of the Mauritanian private press (including the owners of *L'Éveil Hebdo*, *Le Calame*, *L'Authentique*, etc.) threatened to suspend publication due to rising costs from the national (government) printing house. After meeting with the minister of communications and the manager of the national printing house, the owners decided to put off their "press-free day." This led to the creation of an organization designed to protect the interests of publishers, the RPM.

Similar organizations such as the Association Nationale pour la Presse indépendante,¹⁰ UPPIM, API, AJM, EPI and CRED were created for the same purpose but lacked impetus and leadership. Rivalries between the different newspaper groups in a disorganized media context also slowed the development of these pioneering organizations.

Sy said, "In reaction to the creation of RPM, or as a result of them being rejected by [the RPM], a number of private newspapers (*La Presse*, *La Voix des Travailleurs*, *Nouakchott Matin*, *El Alam*, etc.) with uncertain periodicity, created their own grouping in June 2008, called the Regroupement des Éditeurs de Mauritanie."¹¹ The panelists pointed out that due to the precariousness of their working conditions, journalists and publishers often could not find their place within such corporate or union-type associations.

¹⁰ National Association for an Independent Press

¹¹ Mauritanian Publishers' Assembly

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.

The panelists also noted that the private press faces numerous obstacles to their growth and unification. First, they do not own their own printing presses. The only existing press is the national (governmental) printing house. It prints the two governmental daily newspapers, *Horizons* and *Chaab*, as well as the majority of the independent newspapers. Second, the only existing distribution network is owned by MAPECI, publisher of the daily newspapers *Nouakchott Info* (French) and *Akbar Nouakchott* (Arabic). Finally, supporting infrastructure such as stores, newsstands and other methods of distribution are also poorly organized or lacking altogether.

Alassane Sow, head of distribution and sales at the weekly *L'Éveil-Hebdo*, said, "The lack of quality printing houses does not encourage advertisers and the lack of appropriate distribution resources makes it impossible for newspapers to reach remote or isolated areas of the country, and all these factors are part of the overall collapse of the press."

The panelists agreed that 10 years after the appearance of the independent press the status and basic training of journalists are some of the recurring issues in the trade. According to the report of the national advisory committee for the press and broadcast reform, "There are no journalism programs in the Mauritanian schools. From its very beginning, the Mauritanian television has consisted primarily of radio people. In most cases, they were trained on the job. And their competencies are extremely heterogeneous.

"The status of the journalist still needs a proper definition. The profession is not governed by a collective contract. Most journalists in the private press work in the main office in the capital of Nouakchott. Not all newspapers can afford local correspondents, only in the larger cities or regions."

Weddou said, "Most local media continue to be characterized by amateurism masquerading as professionalism." Few journalists, regardless of whether they work for private or public media, attended journalism school. Instead, most learned the trade on the job despite the call for the creation of a training center or institute for the written and broadcast press by the 2006 report of the national advisory committee for the press and broadcast reform.

Moulaye Ould Mohamed Laghdaf, the prime minister of the military junta that came to power on August 6, presented the global report of the EGD on January 2, 2009. The prime minister announced the creation of a journalism training institute but according to journalist Moussa Diop in *Le Quotidien de Nouakchott*, "When will these declarations trumpeted *urbi et orbi*, just like many others, become realities?"

List of Panel Participants

Thiam Mamadou, journalist, *Le Calame*, Nouakchott

Yero Amel N'Diaye, independent journalist, Nouakchott

Kissima Diagana, journalist, *La Tribune*, Nouakchott

Mountagua Diop, regional correspondent, *L'Éveil-Hebdo*,
Boghé

Addahi Weddou, journalist, *La Lumière du Nord*, Nouadhibou

Alassane Sow, head of Distribution and Sales, *L'Éveil-Hebdo*,
Nouakchott

Samba Camara, regional correspondent, *Biladi*, Sélibaby

Birome Guèye, member, Haute autorité de la presse et de
l'audiovisuel, Nouakchott

Mame Sèye Diop, correspondent, Senegalese daily newspaper
Walf fadjri, Nouakchott

Khalilou Diagana, journalist, *Mauritanian News Portal*, Cridem

Moderator

Mamoudou Sy, publication manager, *L'Eveil-Hebdo*,
Nouakchott

Assistant Moderator

Dewa Dianifaba, supervisor, IEC—Nutrition Department,
Support Project for the Health and Nutrition Sector,
Nouakchott.