

Political Corruption Cripples Mauritania's Societal and Economic Development

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Abstract: This paper considers the ongoing burden corruption creates in the nation of Mauritania. Since gaining independence from France in 1960, the country has experienced more than ten attempted or realized military coup d' etats. This instability created an atmosphere in which massive corruption took root and prospered within every sector of society. After more than sixty years as an independent nation, and despite enormous pressure from international governments, donors, and NGO's, corruption does not appear to be lessening, as annual "perception of corruption" indices continue to reveal. The cost of such activities is staggering. Despite the country's vast economic potential based on a bounty of natural resources including extensive iron ore deposits, generous natural gas reserves, large scale fishing rights and more, Mauritania remains among the world's least advanced developing countries, ranking on the low end of human development indices. While poor governance can be blamed for a portion of this failure, the primary culprit is greed. Corruption and classism keep the upper classes wealthy and powerful, while all others remain poverty stricken, illiterate, and in poor health.

Keywords: corruption, bribery, patronage, judiciary, gifts, favoritism, Mauritania.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nation-wide corruption in Mauritania is a systemic problem which manifests at all levels of society ranging from individuals to businesses to governments. The depth and breadth of the practice is so far-reaching it extends to dealings beyond the country's borders. If we use the World Bank definition of corruption as "the use of public office for private gain" (Jasmin Chakeri), the blame for such exploitation rests squarely on government actors, for it is the considerable weakness of the Mauritanian government, legal system, judiciary, and compliance monitoring structures which allow corruption not only to exist, but to thrive throughout society.

Mauritania's corruption has been classified into three categories: *grand corruption*, which occurs at legal and policy levels; *administrative corruption*, which occurs at personnel and contracting levels; and *petty corruption*, which includes everyday bribes between individuals. Further, corruptions not an equal-opportunity endeavor in any of these categories because social class drives favoritism. Ethnicity, skin color, tribalism, caste systems, and the now-illegal (but ongoing) practice of slavery all assist in the implementation of entrenched corruption. To be clear, the highest echelon of classes, the White Moors, participate in and benefit most from the use of corruption; and the highest castes within that group, Noblemen, are to prosper most. (For a more expansive discussion on the role of ethnicity and slavery in Mauritania, see my paper entitled "Hereditary Slavery Shackles Mauritania. (Gabbay)

Efforts have been made to reduce or eliminate the level of corruption in Mauritania, largely at the demand of international businesses and governments involved in international trade who insist on this condition as a precursor to their continued involvement. While the overall situation has improved somewhat in recent years, a 2022 "Corruption Perceptions Index" rated the country "72 on a scale of 100", with 100 being little or no detectable corruption perceived. That number

increased slightly over the 2021 index, indicating a slight reversal in progress. (GAN Integrity: Risk & Compliance). This is not an encouraging indicator.

Within the aforementioned categories, nine areas of Mauritanian society suffer from moderate to very high levels of corruption. Procurement is at the heart of nearly all government activities, and the opportunities and for bribes is exceedingly far-reaching. This paper delves into the opportunities for corruption this activity presents, and the many ways in which the country and its people suffer from the impact.

2. THE COST OF CORRUPTION

Located on the North Atlantic Ocean in Western Africa, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania suffers from extreme poverty, with 40% of its population living below the poverty line. Food insecurity, fragile natural resources, high unemployment, and a significant lack of formal education hampers efforts to secure economic and social development.



Figure 1.1 Political Map of Mauritania

Fewer than four million people inhabit a land of one million square kilometers, making Mauritania's population low relative to its physical size. With no natural fresh water in the country, people are tightly crowded into the capital city of Nouakchott where a quarter of the population lives. The rest are split between a handful of smaller cities. These concentrated population centers contribute to several entrenched problems including the perpetuation of locked-in social customs which are both discriminatory and exclusionary.

Mauritania operates within a caste system that highly favors one group. The country was named after the Mauri people, a lighter-skinned, Berber-speaking tribe traceable to the 3rd century B.C.E. (CIA Factbook, 2020.) Their direct descendants, the *Bidhan* or so-called 'White Moors', make up the highest caste. (Sutton) This caste holds all, or nearly all, positions of power in the government, including the powerful judiciary. The second caste consists of so-named 'Black Moors.' The lowest caste of Mauritians are the *Maalmine* class, which includes non-Arabic speaking Sub-Saharan Africans, many of whom have been enslaved for generations (despite laws against slavery.) They are considered "untouchables." (Mkhaitir)

While corruption thrives in Mauritania for a host of reasons, the entrenched caste system is key to preventing all but the upper levels of the White Moors to achieve financial largesse, upward mobility, land ownership, worthy educational opportunities, and essentially all opportunities to improve one's station in life. Should someone from a lower caste use their talents and capabilities to attempt such an effort, they will experience blockades that remove any opportunity. This system is absolute and unyielding, regardless of the flimsy legislation in place to prevent it. The caste system has been in place in Mauritania for centuries; its undoing is unlikely in the foreseeable future. As long as a caste system holds, corruption will remain entrenched.

3. THE PLAYGROUND OF MAURITANIA'S CORRUPTION

There is no sector of Mauritanian society where the heavy hand of corruption does not strike. Multiple studies have confirmed this to be fact. Major categories include the Judicial System, Police, Public Services, Land Administration, Tax Administration, Customs Administration, Public Procurement, Natural Resources, Legislation, and Civil Society. (GAN Integrity: Risk & Compliance)

We now take a closer look at the primary areas corruption in Mauritania most negatively impacts its people.

a. Judiciary. A well-functioning judiciary lies at the heart of free, democratic, highly-developed nations, and stands strong in the face of corruption. Without it, citizens have no recourse when they are cheated and prevented from participating fully in the economy or social structures. They are powerless. Members of the upper class can not only prevent the participation of lower classes, but can also steal from them with impunity. This impunity serves as an announcement to society that corruption is allowed and the natural course of things, which encourages its proliferation.

Judicial corruption impacts Mauritians in a number of ways, yet it is most prevalent in the following areas: *Selective access to justice*, whereby lower classes of Mauritians with no social connections must pay to have their legal cases heard; *Manipulation of facts*, whereby evidence, statements, and other matters are tampered with or entirely falsified; *Speed of processing cases*, whereby graft and social rank control whether one's case will ever be heard; and *Hidden charges* known as 'Stamp duties,' which are applied for no other apparent justification than someone demands a bribe for some invented reason.

With corruption so deeply imbedded in the Judiciary, malfeasance is rarely prosecuted, creating a society with no underlying structure to support justice. Power and wealth and class thus determine the outcome of the judicial process. Therefore, a large part of the Mauritanian population is being deprived of its rightful access to justice.

b. Police. Mauritania's police force regularly demands bribes completely independent of other activity. Indeed, funds attained through bribery demands are a notable source of police income. One such activity, which frequently occurs under the cover of darkness, takes place at highway roadblocks or checkpoints constructed for the purpose of demanding funds in exchange for allowing drivers to pass. This practice is so imbedded in Mauritanian culture it is rarely questioned, and police officers are seldom investigated or prosecuted.

Even more problematic for the general public, however, is the fact that police infrequently do their jobs to protect the populace or businesses. This results in an extensive reliance on private security firms for those able to pay. Others remain at the mercy of criminals. Law and order suffers from such negligence, but with a corrupt government that hires and maintains employment of those in certain classes with connections, ordinary citizens have no recourse.

c. Private Sector Development. For a country to develop economically the private sector must have the opportunity to operate and grow freely without undue constraints or economic burden. Given the elevated levels of corruption already discussed, it follows that bribery is an integral part of getting business done in Mauritania.

An in-depth survey of Mauritanian businesses conducted by the World Bank revealed that of 361 firms surveyed, 303 of them (84%) admitted paying bribes to government officials. Despite this dramatic percentage, the practice of paying bribes to get anything of merit accomplished is so integral to the culture that the same study found only 18% of businesses perceived corruption as an obstacle to growth. (World Bank)

In the world of corruption, social status is determinant, however. This aforementioned World Bank survey does not report as to which class or caste business owners are, yet as discussed in section 2 of this paper, only the upper castes within the White Moor class are allowed to participate in private development. Hurdles to lower, unconnected classes are such an accepted part of the social fabric that their lack of participation is assumed, and not considered corruption *per se*. The situation is made obvious by the fact that only a few families own a "high concentration" of businesses in trade and commerce. (World Bank)

4. POLITICAL CORRUPTION: A WORLD UNTO ITSELF

While few doubted political corruption's insidious hold on Mauritania, the arrest and imprisonment of President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz in 2021 provided proof. After serving two-five year terms, a parliamentary investigation indicted President Aziz for suspected embezzlement during his administration. But graft is an accepted part of the culture, as we have discussed, and political corruption goes far beyond the mere demand of payment or other quid pro quo events.

For perspective, the history of Mauritania is one of political coup d' etats, which is exactly how President Aziz came to power in 2008. While the election to succeed him was generally accepted as legitimate by outside observers, the ten years of Aziz's presidency reflected favoritism, nepotism, and even one charge of "high treason" against President Aziz for refusing to testify on embezzlement charges. Under Aziz's administration, highly valuable gold mining and fishing licenses, land distribution, government contracts and tax payments were all dispersed under suspect situations. One notable example was the construction of a new airport in 2016, which drew particularly strong criticism as it was awarded to a company with no experience in airport construction. (Freedom House). The former president's government also allocated nearly four million square feet of property to eighteen fake companies. They flagrantly violated regulations on project management through awarding infrastructure contracts to public companies that passed assets onto Ould Abdel Aziz's family and political allies. (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)

Mauritanian government corruption is far from limited to the president's office, however. A Parliamentary Inquiry Committee was formed in 2020 by the opposition party to investigate the actions of the ruling party. The committee found that state officials colluded with beneficiaries in the "the sale of public land, awarded hundreds of millions of dollars in illegal concessions, and made staggering profits through partnerships, for example with foreign fishing companies that engage in tax evasion at the expense of the local fishing communities." (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)

5. EFFORTS TO REDUCE CORRUPTION

The struggle to end corruption in Mauritania is not a new one. As early as 2004 the government pledged to fight all forms of bribery, nepotism, fraud, graft, and so on. The fight was weak and unfocused, spurred on by a discovery that five officials from the ministry had stolen close to a million dollars from an international aid fund established to distribute food and other material goods to victims of a severe drought in the country. (Voice of America) Prior to that arrest, no one had been charged with corruption in eight years, despite massive levels of bribery and fraud.

By 2013 the situation had only deteriorated further. In that year, Sherpa, a Dutch NGO based in Paris, drafted a report which it forwarder to multiple international donors who were funding Mauritania at the time. Sherpa reported a staggering level of government corruption in Mauritania and warned donors their funds were at great risk of being misappropriated. "Mauritania is currently following an extremely worrying path and the Rule of Law is in sharp decline." (Sherpa NGO)

Four years later, in 2017, Sherpa reported that the situation was further deteriorating, describing it as "going from bad to worse." Considering that \$4.5 billion dollars were made available to Mauritania in 2016 by international actors, the situation had to be seriously addressed. Not wanting to punish the innocent and often desperate population for whom the funds were intended, something clearly had to be done. Sherpa advise donors and lenders to closely monitor usage and distribution of their funds. "In particular, donors must meticulously watch over the lawfulness of the contracts concluded in the context of the specific projects they are supporting." (Sherpa NGO)

6. CONCLUSION

The irony of the situation, often referred to as the "paradox of plenty," is seen in the fact that Mauritania is rich in natural resources, has enormous economic potential, and has a small population of only four million people to support. There is no valid reason for the country to be poor, or for foreign aid to be required, save the prevalence of corruption and otherwise poor governance. Similarly, endemic corruption creates a major obstacle to the development of business, and with it, development.

Looking back over twenty-five years, the overall corruption index has actually worsened, moving from 31 to 28, with zero being 'highly corrupt' and one-hundred considered 'very clean'. (Transparency International) The US State Department, along with multiple European governments, continue to monitor and report on the continued abuse of laws and disempowerment of the majority of citizens. Only so much pressure can be brought to bear by these external actors, such as reduced foreign aid. The real power comes from economic levers, but the incentives are lacking. Foreign countries can withhold investments in joint ventures, but it is not in their interest to do so. Quite the contrary, as they can make deals more easily by working with a limited number of players, and they can also participate in corrupt practices in order to take advantage of lucrative contracts.

While multiple studies are conducted and frameworks suggested by members of the African Union, particularly in conjunction with NGO's (Transparency International), they tend to lack agency. Intentions are well meaning, but results prove lackluster.

The greatest chance for reducing corruption in Mauritania is most likely to come from its own people. Until great numbers of Mauritians join forces to protest ongoing corruption, make known the situation to the world and expose injustice; until they demand a share in the economy, in education, in representation, in business, and in every area where injustice prevails, they will not enjoy the benefits of development that will lift them out of poverty and oppression.

There is much work to be done.

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