

# Submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

75<sup>th</sup> Session (Feb-Mar 2024)

## Review of the second periodic report of Mauritania

### Anti-Slavery International and SOS Esclaves

#### Introduction

1. This submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (hereafter “the Committee”) is drafted and submitted by Anti-Slavery International<sup>1</sup> and SOS Esclaves.<sup>2</sup>
2. We write in advance of the Committee’s 75<sup>th</sup> session to inform its review of Mauritania’s compliance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (hereafter “the Covenant”).
3. The submission provides information on the continued existence of descent-based slavery in Mauritania, and its impact on the economic, social and cultural rights of those who are currently or were formerly enslaved.
4. The information below pertains to Articles 2.2 and Article 6 of the Covenant:
  - i. Article 2.2 guarantees that the rights enunciated in the present Covenant will be exercised without discrimination of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.
  - ii. Article 6 guarantees the right to work, which includes the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts.

#### Executive Summary

5. Despite being officially abolished in 1981, the practice of descent-based slavery persists in Mauritania. The Haratines (Black Moors), who are ascribed to a ‘slave caste’ – with this status ascribed at birth and passed on from one generation to the next – have been discriminated against and enslaved for centuries by the Beydane

---

<sup>1</sup> Anti-Slavery International, founded in 1839 and in consultative status with ECOSOC since 1950, is the oldest international human rights organisation in the world, working to eradicate all contemporary forms of slavery. <https://www.antislavery.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> SOS-Esclaves are a Mauritanian NGO leading in the fight against slavery in Mauritania for over 20 years, led by survivors of slavery. They seek to expose the realities of the practice, challenge its widespread acceptance, and defend the rights of those seeking to escape slavery, as well as working to end discrimination faced by people of slave descent. <http://www.sosesclaves.org/>.

(White Moors).<sup>3</sup> Representing the largest ethnocultural group in the country<sup>4</sup>, Haratines suffer disenfranchisement and exclusion<sup>5</sup> and as found by the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, are “economically, socially, and culturally dependent on people from priestly or noble castes”.<sup>6</sup> People currently or formerly in slavery typically live in remote rural regions, entirely under the control of their ‘masters’ or former ‘masters’, and are thus extremely difficult to reach.<sup>7</sup> Having been treated as property their whole lives, they are deprived of all rights. Their extreme dependence and social isolation make it almost impossible to escape slavery; those who do tend to live in destitution or return to slavery<sup>8</sup> or exploitation.<sup>9</sup> Whilst there are no official statistics from the Government of Mauritania on those subjected to descent-based slavery, the most recent report of the Global Slavery Index estimates that there are 149,000 people living in slavery in Mauritania, which includes descent-based slavery, ranking third globally and second within Africa in terms of prevalence.<sup>10</sup>

6. Whilst some progress has been made towards addressing and ending slavery since Mauritania’s last review in 2012, major gaps remain in the Mauritanian Government’s enforcement of anti-slavery legislation, in tackling discrimination towards descendants of enslaved people, and in protecting and supporting those with experience of slavery to access their economic, social and cultural rights.
7. Since the adoption of Law No. 2015-031 criminalising slavery and slavery-like practices<sup>11</sup> in 2015 and the establishment of Special Courts on Slavery in 2016, there

<sup>3</sup> Minority Rights Group, ‘Mauritania: Contributing to the elimination of persistent slavery practices’ (2020), <https://minorityrights.org/what-we-do/elimination-of-persistent-slavery/>.

<sup>4</sup> US Department of State, ‘2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mauritania’, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/mauritania/>.

<sup>5</sup> OHCHR, ‘Access to justice and cultural change in Mauritania’, <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/OHCHRreport2022/access-to-justice-and-cultural-change-in-mauritania.html>.

<sup>6</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, ‘End of Mission Statement’ (May 2022), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/05/mauritania-un-expert-encouraged-progress-says-more-work-needed-fully>.

<sup>7</sup> These areas, known as adwabas (places where only former slaves live) or villages of former black African slaves, are largely devoid of all basic services, such as schools, wells and health centres, and face dire challenges with respect to socioeconomic opportunities. See BTI, ‘Mauritania Country Report 2022’, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MRT>.

<sup>8</sup> Some former slaves reportedly continue to work for their former ‘masters’ or others under exploitative conditions to retain access to land they had traditionally farmed. US Department of State, ‘2021 Trafficking in Persons Report: Mauritania’, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/mauritania/>.

<sup>9</sup> Manual labour is still regarded as the preserve of former slaves, so Haratines disproportionately work in difficult and onerous occupations such as servants and masons; in rural areas, many forms of slavery-like exploitation still exist within the land tenure system and Haratines still pay various forms of tribute to landowners, although they should be free. Minority Rights Group, ‘For many Haratines, slavery has simply developed into new forms of discrimination’ <https://minorityrights.org/programmes/library/trends/trends2022/mauritania/> (2022); Haratines are also targeted for domestic servitude (especially women and girls), and individuals of Haratine descent working in the fisheries, mining, domestic work, livestock-herding, and construction sectors are vulnerable to forced labour. US Department of State, ‘2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Mauritania’, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/mauritania/>.

<sup>10</sup> Walk Free, ‘Modern slavery in Mauritania, Global Slavery Index 2023 Country Snapshot’, <https://cdn.walkfree.org/content/uploads/2023/09/28082229/GSI-Snapshot-Mauritania.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Available in English at: <https://antislaverylaw.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Mauritania-Slavery-Law.pdf>.

has been very little improvement to the chronically low rates of prosecutions and convictions. Discrimination towards people of slave descent meanwhile continues, causing them to suffer economic and political marginalisation and limited access to resources and services, including the justice sector. The legal framework on discrimination is not fit for purpose and the inaccessibility of identity documents keeps people of slave descent dependent on their traditional ‘masters’ even when no longer under their direct control, driving vulnerability to further exploitation.

#### 8. Suggested recommendations for the review of Mauritania:

- Ensure that the Special Courts for Slavery have the necessary financial and human resources required to function effectively, including by ensuring adequate and swift compensation for victims.
- Provide timely and sufficient long-term support for survivors who emerge from slavery destitute and in urgent need of economic, social and psychological assistance, to enable their integration, including access to social services, particularly healthcare and schooling for children.
- Reform the enrolment and identity document system to enable members of the Haratine and Afro-Mauritanian communities and people leaving slavery, including children, to access civil status and identity documents to facilitate their access to state support and services.
- Take steps to prevent harassment, attacks, and harm to human rights defenders, including anti-slavery activists and NGOs, by adopting and implementing a specific national law for the protection of human rights defenders (Soufi Ould Chein law).
- Adapt Act No. 2018-023 on the criminalisation of discrimination to align it with international standards, including by prohibiting discrimination based on caste or ethnicity, and ensuring that the Act provides sufficient guarantees of effective civil and administrative remedies for any type of discrimination.

#### 9. Suggested questions for state-party review

- What measures will the Government take to properly resource all Special Courts for Slavery and to ensure that victims receive the legal assistance that they are entitled to under Act No. 2015-031?
- What further steps will the Government take to ensure that members of the Haratine and Afro-Mauritanian communities, including those who have escaped slavery, can access civil status?
- Are there sufficient mechanisms in place to accurately determine the number of Mauritians subjected to descent-based slavery, and if not,

what will the Government do to facilitate this?

- What steps will the Government take to protect human rights defenders, including anti-slavery activists and NGOs, from harassment, attacks, and harm?

### Issues of concern

#### **Right to work (art. 6)**

10. Article 6 of the Covenant outlines the right of every human being to decide freely to accept or choose work, implying not being forced in any way whatsoever to exercise or engage in employment.<sup>12</sup> The Committee has elaborated in General Comment No.18 on the Right to Work that States parties are under the obligation to respect the right to work including by prohibiting forced or compulsory labour and refraining from denying or limiting equal access to decent work for all persons, especially disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups.<sup>13</sup>

11. In its List of Issues under the right to work, the Committee asked the Government of Mauritania to:

*“Please provide information on the impact of the measures to combat slavery and slavery-like practices that are outlined in the State party’s second periodic report (paras. 60 to 65). Indicate whether steps have been taken to collect data on the extent of slavery situations and, if so, provide related statistical data. Please also provide information on the measures taken to ensure that victims of slavery can effectively file complaints, and indicate the number of prosecutions brought and convictions obtained, the penalties imposed and the reparations afforded to victims over the past 10 years. Please provide information on the measures taken to address the difficulties that persons subjected to slavery and former slaves encounter when attempting to reintegrate into society and ensure that they can exercise their economic, social and cultural rights, including in the areas of employment and social security.”<sup>14</sup>*

**Measures taken to ensure that victims of slavery can effectively file complaints; the number of prosecutions brought and convictions obtained; and the penalties imposed and reparations afforded to victims over the past 10 years**

12. In 2015, the Government adopted Law No. 2015-031 criminalising slavery and slavery-like practices, and in January 2016, Decree No. 2016-002 established three specialized regional anti-slavery courts in Nouakchott, Nouadhibou and Néma. In 2020, the Government enacted Law No. 2020-017 on the prevention and suppression of

<sup>12</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ‘The Right to Work, General comment No. 18’, UN Doc E/C.12/GC/18 (6 February 2006), para 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., para 23.

<sup>14</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ‘List of issues in relation to the second periodic report of Mauritania’, UN Doc E/C.12/MRT/Q/2 (16 November 2021), para 13.

human trafficking and the protection of victims<sup>15</sup> updating the previous law of 2003. A positive step, this new law increased penalties, extended legal protections for victims, and included descent-based slavery as a form of trafficking in persons.<sup>16</sup> In 2021, the Ministers of Justice, National Defence, and the Interior and Decentralisation issued joint circular 104-2021, which called on public prosecutors, judicial police, and security forces to treat cases brought under the 2015 anti-slavery and 2020 anti-trafficking laws with greater seriousness.

13. Despite these positive steps, there are significant challenges in enforcing anti-slavery legislation. SOS Esclaves highlight that the state services, such as courts, security and administrative services do not adequately raise awareness of slavery practices or investigate those who continue to practice slavery. The special courts have not been provided with the same resources as the other special courts, such as the drugs court<sup>17</sup>, and they have done little to address the persistent problems of poor law enforcement. The 2023 US Trafficking in Persons report also found that Mauritania's special courts "lacked adequate staff and resources to investigate and prosecute hereditary slavery crimes throughout the country, especially in rural regions, and did not have specialized prosecutors or investigative magistrates."<sup>18</sup> As a result, the perpetrators of descent-based slavery enjoy relative impunity. In the words of a senior lawyer working with SOS-Esclaves, using the judicial system for slavery cases is an "uphill battle that seems impossible to win".<sup>19</sup>

14. The Government states, in its Reply to the List of Issues, that to date 163 slavery cases have been brought before the courts, and of these, 75 have been sentenced to prison, 28 of whom are currently serving their sentences.<sup>20</sup> This relatively low number can be explained by several factors:

- a. If investigations take place, they are usually limited to interviewing the victims and 'masters', often together, which places enormous pressure on victims to change their testimonies.
- b. The accused are often released on bail and are then never located again, often absconding to neighbouring countries, which prevents cases from progressing. In such cases, release on bail should not be granted systematically and the civil

---

<sup>15</sup> Loi N° 2020-017 relative à la prévention et la répression de la traite des personnes et la protection des victimes, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5f92b8e34.html>.

<sup>16</sup> US Department of State, 'Trafficking in Persons Report' (2021) <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TIPR-GPA-upload-07222021.pdf>, p. 383.

<sup>17</sup> Valérie Couillard, 'Ending slavery in Mauritania: The impact of legal advocacy and strategic litigation from 2010 to 2020: A review of projects aiming to provide access to justice for persons affected by descent-based slavery in Mauritania', *Minority Rights Group* (2021) [https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/MRG\\_Rep\\_Maurit2\\_EN\\_Sept21.pdf](https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/MRG_Rep_Maurit2_EN_Sept21.pdf), p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> US Department of State, '2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Mauritania' <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-trafficking-in-persons-report/mauritania/>.

<sup>19</sup> Valérie Couillard, 'Ending slavery in Mauritania', op.cit, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> OHCHR, 'Réponses de la Mauritanie à la liste de points concernant son deuxième rapport périodique', UN Doc E/C.12/MRT/RQ/2 (15 December 2023), para 58.

party should be notified and be able to oppose it.

- c. Frequently, cases are not prosecuted as slavery crimes under the provisions of Law No. 2015-031, but instead are re-classified as minor offenses, such as work-related conflict under the 2004 Labour Code<sup>21</sup> or the exploitation of minors. Indeed, victims of slavery have recently reported that reports of slavery are often rejected by authorities and requalified as lesser offences such as non-remuneration for work, or employment of a minor, which carry less severe penalties.<sup>22</sup>
  - d. Victims are often pressured by authorities, such as police and judicial officials, into resolving cases with informal settlements. This has been found by SOS-Esclaves, who report that those who have experienced slavery are frequently pressed into withdrawing their complaints and seeking compensation instead, with the cumbersome process and the associated stigma also directly influencing these decisions.<sup>23</sup> It was reported in the 2022 US State Department's Trafficking in Persons report that some prosecutors have encouraged victims to withdraw their complaints in exchange for financial compensation.<sup>24</sup>
15. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are not permitted to proactively launch a case until approached by victims for assistance, and even then, only CSOs that have been registered for five years or more can act as a civil party and bring slavery cases. This is problematic because, whilst consent from victims is essential to start any legal process, the forces on survivors to not report are strong; these range from reprisals, to reluctance to prosecute or denounce people they consider their only family or kinship ties, to lack of awareness of anti-slavery laws and complaint procedures.

***The lack of reintegration support and the impacts on survivors' ability to exercise their economic, social and cultural rights:***

16. There is a lack of systematic and formal care for survivors of slavery from the Government, including reintegration and/or rehabilitation services addressing social, economic, or psychological needs. No specific programmes are implemented for their benefit. As a result survivors, once freed from slavery, greatly risk relapsing into it.
17. For example, the National Agency for the Fight against the Legacy of Slavery, Integration and the Fight against Poverty (TADAMOUN) - established in 2013 and replaced in 2021 by the National Agency for Solidarity and the Struggle Against

---

<sup>21</sup> Loi N° 2004-017 portant code du travail, available in French at: <https://antislaverylaw.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Mauritania-Labour-Code.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> OHCHR, 'Visit to Mauritania - Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, Tomoya Obokata', UN Doc A/HRC/54/30/Add.2 (21 July 2023), para 38.

<sup>23</sup> Valérie Couillard, 'Ending slavery in Mauritania', op.cit, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> US Department of State, 'Trafficking in Persons Report' (2022) <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/337308-2022-TIP-REPORT-inaccessible.pdf>, p. 379.

Exclusion (TAAZOUR)<sup>25</sup> - undertook little work on slavery. Instead, it focused on the 'poverty reduction' aspect of its mandate but with no specific efforts to reach people of slave descent or those in slavery.<sup>26</sup>

18. Whilst its replacement, TAAZOUR, has implemented some measures which are beneficial to victims of slavery and similar practices<sup>27</sup>, the agency does not have any programmes that specifically support slavery-affected populations; the reference to slavery was also removed from the agency's name when it replaced TADAMOUN.<sup>28</sup> This is indicative of a concerning lack of political will from the Government to provide institutional funding and support to adequately tackle slavery. As noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, the agency does not tackle structural barriers keeping those currently and formerly enslaved in poverty, such as discrimination which prevents them from accessing education, public services and decent work.<sup>29</sup>
19. TAAZOUR's current programmes are not effectively meeting the needs of people currently and formerly enslaved, which needs investigation. SOS Esclaves alleges that official government institutions and agencies responsible for human rights promotion and protection, including TAAZOUR, lack transparency and are often very limited in their activities. For example, SOS Esclaves has observed that the many health insurance policies distributed free of charge by TAAZOUR have done little to benefit those currently and formerly enslaved.
20. SOS Esclaves, along with other CSOs in Mauritania, are concerned about the lack of ethnic representation among TAAZOUR's staff; they also critique the lack of transparency in the agency's distribution of aid and support, as they believe that aid is diverted to serve family ties and relationships.<sup>30</sup> SOS Esclaves are calling for TAAZOUR to include representatives from expert Mauritanian CSOs to address this imbalance and the agency's lack of diversity and transparency, and to step up effective support to survivors of slavery. In the meantime, CSOs are compelled to fill the gaps left by the Government. The absence of effective state programmes and policies to provide socio-economic support to people emerging from slavery is a huge challenge, and leaves victims vulnerable to further exploitation or a return to their former 'masters'.

## Non-discrimination (art. 2, paragraph 2)

---

<sup>25</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, 'End of Mission Statement', op.cit.

<sup>26</sup> OHCHR, 'Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights on his mission to Mauritania', UN Doc A/HRC/35/26/Add.1 (8 March 2017), para 47.

<sup>27</sup> Such as cash transfers to victims of child labour so that parents can send their children to school instead of forcing them to work.

<sup>28</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, 'End of Mission Statement', op.cit.

<sup>29</sup> OHCHR, 'Visit to Mauritania - Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery', op.cit, para 60.

<sup>30</sup> See also para 62 of the UN Special Rapporteur's report on his visit to Mauritania, which found that "many victims of slavery and civil society organizations to believe that the agency primarily serves the interests of Beydane by contracting Beydane-owned firms to carry out its programmes and including many Beydane as beneficiaries of its programmes." Ibid.

21. Article 2.2 of the Covenant stipulates that discrimination based on birth is prohibited; Article 10.3 specifically states that special measures should be taken on behalf of children and young persons “without any discrimination for reasons of parentage”. As highlighted by the Committee in its General Comment No.20, the prohibited grounds of birth include descent, especially on the basis of caste and analogous systems of inherited status, and that States parties should take steps to prevent, prohibit and eliminate discriminatory practices directed against members of descent-based communities and act against the dissemination of ideas of superiority and inferiority on the basis of descent.<sup>31</sup>
22. In Mauritania, discrimination against the Haratine and Afro-Mauritanian communities is deep rooted. They are economically and politically marginalised, are under-represented in public and political institutions; Haratines constitute at least 45 percent of the population but hold fewer than 10 percent of government leadership positions,<sup>32</sup> and suffer from limited access to resources and services such as land, employment, education, housing, water, food, healthcare and social services.
23. On 18 January 2018, the National Assembly approved Act No. 2018-023 on the criminalisation of discrimination.<sup>33</sup> A group of UN Special Rapporteurs quickly released a statement highlighting their concerns about the “inaccurate and confusing” nature of its provisions, including the definition of discrimination.”<sup>34</sup> These concerns were reiterated in 2019 by the UN Human Rights Committee, which noted that “the lack of legal clarity” may lead to interpretations which “perpetuate discriminatory practices”.<sup>35</sup> For example, Article 10 dictates a prison sentence of up to five years for anyone who “promotes inflammatory speech that is contrary to the official doctrine of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania”,<sup>36</sup> putting at risk those speaking out against inhuman discriminatory practices, such as slavery.
24. Haratine and Afro-Mauritanian communities face barriers accessing state services (which are already very limited), a key issue being that the requirements for obtaining identification documents (ID) are difficult or impossible for them to fulfil. The process is discriminatory, as the requirements include the presentation of parents’ details (which are often unknown to young victims of slavery who are born of relationships between someone in slavery and her ‘master’ or between two people in slavery) and documentation such as marriage or birth certificates, many of which are never issued

---

<sup>31</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ‘GENERAL COMMENT No. 20, ‘Non-discrimination in economic, social and cultural rights (art. 2, para. 2 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)’, UN Doc E/C.12/GC/20, para 26. See also paras 24 and 25.

<sup>32</sup> US Department of State, ‘2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mauritania’, op.cit.

<sup>33</sup> Loi N° 2018-023 portant incrimination de la discrimination, available at:

<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/112901/141212/F1888491512/MRT-112901.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> OHCHR, ‘Mauritania: UN rights experts urge immediate reform of “flawed” anti-discrimination law’ (2018),

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2018/01/mauritania-un-rights-experts-urge-immediate-reform-flawed-anti>.

<sup>35</sup> UN Human Rights Committee, ‘Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Mauritania’, UN Doc CCPR/C/MRT/CO/2 (23 August 2019), para 12.

<sup>36</sup> Amnesty International, ‘Submission to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial

Discrimination’ (2019), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wpcontent/uploads/2021/05/AFR3802432019ENGLISH.pdf>,

p. 4.



to Haratine or Afro-Mauritanian communities. The difficulties faced by people released from slavery in obtaining ID creates a huge barrier in access to state programmes and services which are of relevance to securing economic, social and cultural rights.

25. Despite mandates from the central government to facilitate civil registration, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery received reports during his 2022 visit of continued discrimination at local level, such as judges refusing to hold eligibility hearings for those without documents on the basis of their ethnic background, and denial to single mothers of the right to register children in their own names.<sup>37</sup>
26. While the Government has previously referred to prevention activities that it has undertaken, including awareness-raising caravans, anti-slavery organisations are concerned that the sermons given by Ulemas<sup>38</sup> and the awareness-raising caravans simply reiterate that slavery no longer exists in Mauritania, rather than informing the public that it is criminalised and what they should do if they are experiencing or are aware of it. SOS Esclaves have found that the few caravans organised by the Government only travelled to four wilayas (regions) out of the country's fifteen, were not inclusive, and the messages conveyed often had nothing to do with slavery. Considering these deficiencies, it is important for the Government to design and coordinate awareness-raising activities with expert CSOs and representative trades unions, including people with lived experience of slavery.

### General information (human rights defenders)

27. In its List of Issues under General Information (human rights defenders), the Committee asked the Government of Mauritania to: *“Please provide information on measures taken to protect human rights defenders, in particular those working on economic, social and cultural rights including land issues and the fight against discrimination and slavery and slavery-like practices, against any acts of reprisal, including harassment, threats and arbitrary detention, and also on the impact of these measures.”*<sup>39</sup>
28. The Government responded that *“Freedom of association and expression are guaranteed by the Constitution and the law and fully respected by the Government. Human rights defenders enjoy the protection of the law and operate freely without hindrance or harassment...Law no. 004/2021 on Associations, Foundations and Networks establishes a declaratory regime for the formation of associations and non-governmental organizations. This system enables all individuals, including human rights defenders, to form associations with fairly straightforward formalities.”*<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, ‘End of Mission Statement’, op.cit.

<sup>38</sup> The Ulema are Muslim scholars who are recognised as having specialist knowledge of Islamic sacred law and theology.

<sup>39</sup> UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ‘List of issues in relation to the second periodic report of Mauritania’, op.cit, para 2.

<sup>40</sup> OHCHR, ‘Réponses de la Mauritanie à la liste de points concernant son deuxième rapport périodique’, op.cit, para 6.

29. We refute the Government's claims that freedom of expression and association is fully guaranteed in Mauritania. Demonstrations are regularly violently repressed by the police, and authorities have allegedly harassed and detained anti-slavery activists.<sup>41</sup> The political party of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (known as IRA-Mauritania) - whose objective is to eradicate all forms of slavery, racism and corruption in Mauritania - and the Progressive Forces for Change party (FPC), are not legally recognised by the Government and their members have been repressed by authorities, including threats and harassment by authorities.<sup>42</sup>
30. There have been several direct reprisals against staff members of SOS Esclaves in recent years. Among these, two staff members of SOS Esclaves (Ms Aziza Mint Brahim - Head of SOS Esclaves' operational office in Atar region - and Mohamed Ould Brahim - communications manager) were arrested and detained by regional authorities on 6 April 2021<sup>43</sup> after denouncing the donation of a slave as dowry in the Wadane affair, an incident which was uncovered and publicised by SOS Esclaves.<sup>44</sup> Also arrested were an activist and survivor of slavery who informed SOS Esclaves about the Wadane case, and a Swiss journalist.<sup>45</sup>
31. In November 2021 the Government adopted a law criminalizing criticism and derogatory comments of the country's national symbols, including the flag and the President, which has been criticised by numerous Mauritanian NGOs and human rights activists on the basis of its restrictions on freedom of expression.<sup>46</sup> SOS Esclaves is a member of the Executive Office of the West African Network for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, which together with the coalition *Forum des Organisations Nationales des Droits Humains (FONADH)* is calling for the enactment of legislation to protect human rights defenders in Mauritania (Soufi Ould Chein law).<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> US Department of State, 'Trafficking in Persons Report' (2022), op.cit, p. 380.

<sup>42</sup> Underrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisations, 'Haratin: The repressive political climate in Mauritania' (27 December 2022) <https://unpo.org/article/22247>. SOS Esclaves have also highlighted that on 26 December 2023, a group of IRA activists including its national coordinator El Hadj was arrested in Rkiz (Tarza department) for having brandished banners demanding justice and equality between citizens.

<sup>43</sup> Le Calame, 'Adrar: La coordination de SOS Esclaves décapitée' (18 April 2021), <http://lecalame.info/?q=node/11912>. See also Le Calame, 'Les militants de SOS Esclaves libérés' (20 April 2021), <http://lecalame.info/?q=node/11921>.

<sup>44</sup> In April 2021, a woman was offered as a slave at a wedding in the town of Ouadane. *Courrier Internationale*, 'Scandale. Une femme offerte comme dot en Mauritanie : le débat sur l'esclavage relancé' (April 2021), <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/scandale-une-femme-offerte-comme-dot-en-mauritanie-le-debat-sur-lesclavage-relance>.

<sup>45</sup> Cridem, 'Les militants de SOS Esclaves libérés' (20 April 2021) [https://cridem.org/C\\_Info.php?article=744226](https://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=744226). See also US Department of State, '2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Mauritania' which references this incident: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/mauritania/>.

<sup>46</sup> US Department of State, '2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mauritania', op.cit.

<sup>47</sup> In 2023, human rights defender and President of the 'Movement for Social Peace', Soufi Ould Chein, was killed by authorities at a police station in Mauritania; CSOs in Mauritania are calling for a Soufi Ould Chein law to protect human rights defenders in his name. African Defenders, 'Mauritania: The community of human rights defenders shocked by the assassination of Soufi Ould Chein at the premises of a police station in Mauritania' (23 February 2023), <https://africandefenders.org/mauritania/>.