

## IN MAURITANIA – NO SLAVERY WITHOUT IMPUNITY



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*In 1905 the colonial French administration prohibited slavery in Mauritania. In 1960 Mauritania became an independent country and adopted a new constitution in which slavery was officially abolished. Furthermore, in 1980, the government of Mauritania again abolished slavery. In 2007 a law was passed that made slavery punishable, according to which slaveholders could be sentenced to up to 10 years in prison. In reality, however, not much has changed over the last few centuries.*

The government has repeatedly stated that slavery no longer exists in Mauritania. Asked by CNN reporters in December 2011 about slavery in his country the minister of rural development stated: 'I must tell you that in Mauritania, freedom is total: freedom of thought, equality – of all men and women of Mauritania. Equality for all people. There is a phenomenon to which you are probably alluding, that has existed in Mauritania, that has existed in other countries, which is slavery. And it is abolished in all communities, and criminalized today by our government. Therefore, there is absolutely no more problem of that in Mauritania [...] All people are free in Mauritania and this phenomenon no longer exists.' (CNN 17 March 2012) Unfortunately, this is not the case. Mauritania is a classic example for what happens when the existence of a problem is denied or referred to as something that only existed in the past. Slavery is portrayed to be a historical phenomenon. Yet in 2012, 10 to 20 percent of the country's 3.5 million inhabitants are the property of others. The ruling lighter-skinned white Moors enslave the more dark-skinned black Africans, also called Haratin. Most slaves are women and children. It is still common that slaves are given as wedding presents. Slaves mostly serve as domestic help or as agricultural labourers. So far, there has only been one instance where a slaveholder was convicted. However, the verdict was later revoked: Instead of being sentenced to two years in prison in November 2011 for enslaving two 10 and 14 year old boys, Ahmed Ould Hassine's sentence was converted into a simple fine by Mauritania's Supreme Court (Nouakchott 26 April 2012).

### How impunity works

In a 2010 report the UN Special Rapporteur on slavery, Gulnara Shahinia stated that during her visit in Mauritania she '[...] heard of situations where cases of slavery were reported to the relevant authorities. However, either the cases were reclassified and filed under a different name such as 'inheritance or land dispute' or were not pursued owing to insufficient documentary evidence, or the person who put forward the claim was put under pressure from her extended family, master or sometimes local authorities to retract her claim. This results in cases never being reported as 'slavery' and therefore – judicially slavery cases do not exist (Gulnara 2010)'. Hence, it does not matter what the law states; if it is not enforced, the practice continues unpunished.

Even if slaves escape or are liberated by abolitionists, the probability that they return to their former 'masters' is high. In a country where slavery was introduced in the 8th century, a slave is a descendant of former slaves. Slaves are held by the threat of physical force, but – what is more for someone who cannot read and write and make decisions for himself – fleeing means a myriad of challenges. If one is told for a lifetime that slavery is part of Allah's command, being against slavery and running away means to be against religion itself. Former slaves seldom file legal complaints since they are illiterate. Furthermore, they are often harassed and intimidated by officials and their former 'masters'. Unmarried slaves who have children – often the result of rape – can be threatened with prosecution for having committed adultery. The lack of trust in

the judicial system also explains their reluctance to seek justice. Education is vilified: Haratin are made to believe that learning to read means abandoning one's god-given role. Moctar Teyeb, a former slave who fled to the United States told a reporter, that '[...] there are many stories about the Haratin who learns some verses of the Holy Koran, and then he is called names, and shamed until he hates himself' (Finnegan 2010). Learned dependency is extremely difficult to get rid of and job opportunities are scarce in Mauritania. That is also why Mauritanian abolitionist groups call for concerted efforts to provide former slaves with education and housing. Lack of law enforcement and keeping slaves away from education are two of the main pillars on which impunity rests. Another one is making sure that those who speak out and help former slaves to file legal complaints are silenced or driven into exile.

### The battle against abolitionists

Instead of trying to support the struggle against slavery and to assist former slaves as far as possible, the Mauritanian Government silences anybody who discusses the taboo.

For several years now, the Mauritanian authorities have denied an official registration of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA) and have systematically tried to discredit and close down the human rights organisation.

Those in Mauritania who oppose slavery and fight against it, live dangerously. Take the case of Biram Dah Abeid, founder and president of IRA. Biram Dah Abeid and his colleagues are a nuisance for the Mauritanian government because they are continuously trying to organize public protests to make the police and the judiciary take action against slaveholders.

Thanks to its involvement, IRA helped to free several thousand Mauritanian slaves in 2011.

After public protests of human rights activists, many slave owners chose to free their slaves out of fear of prosecution (Society for Threatened Peoples 2011).

Mauritania's government has tried different methods to silence Biram. He was offered lucrative management and government jobs to make him stop his human rights work.

When he refused the proposals, Mauritanian state security members offered money to members of IRA in order to divide the organization. Fake psychological reports were published which declared Biram insane. Leading Muslim imams labelled him as an enemy of Islam because of his on-going criticism of the enslavement of 500,000 Mauritanians – endangering the 'God-given order' in his country. His passport was confiscated for several months to prevent him from spreading information abroad. He repeatedly received subpoenas from the police or state security.


He was able to closely avoid two assassination attempts on his life. Biram has been arrested and imprisoned several times, most recently from late April to August 2012 (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organizations 2012).

He and six associates were arrested during protests against continued forms of slavery that are officially banned. The faithful Muslims – Mauritania is an Islamic Republic – had burned religious texts that justify servitude, thus trying to draw attention to their protest against Muslim clerics who support slavery.

The charge against them was 'Endangering state security'. In prison he fell seriously ill and lost more than 15 kilos. He and his colleagues were released in August after foreign governments called for his release.

### What should be done?

In order for things to change, the Mauritanian government must officially recognize organisations such as IRA instead of persecuting its members. The existing anti-slavery law must be enforced and slaveholders punished. Widespread myths that slavery is what Allah commands must be countered with education. However, as impunity for slaveholders has a long history, it will take time to change the attitudes. ■

 Hanno Schelder | Said – a fleeing slave – just arrived at the IRA headquarter.



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