



# Mauritania

## Mauritania: Introduction

Pierre Christian Tsopmo

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Chart 1: Political map of Mauritania

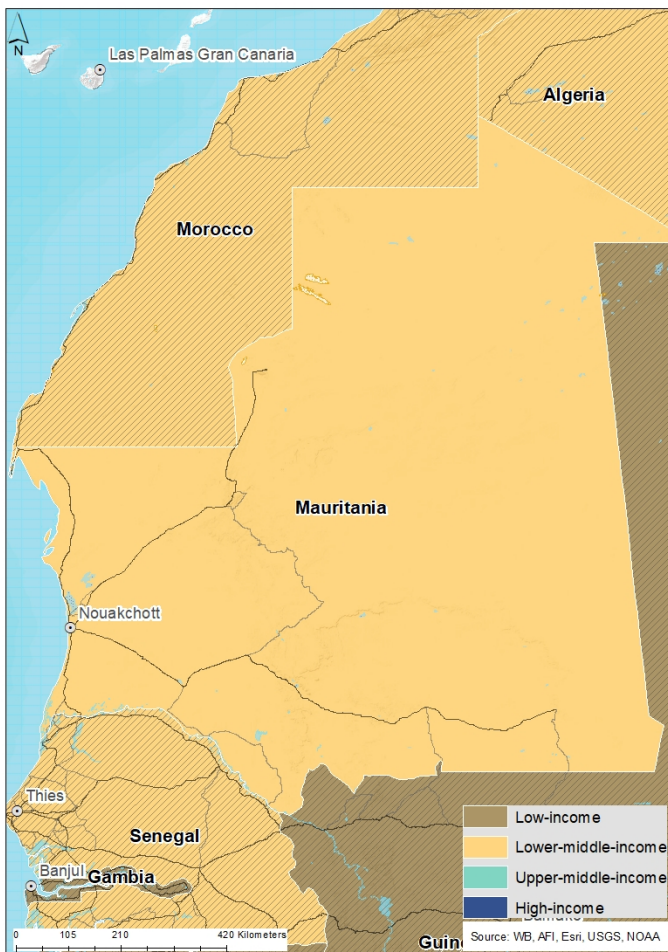


Chart 1 is a political map of Mauritania.

Mauritania is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west, the Western Sahara to the north, Algeria to the northeast, Mali to the east and Senegal to the south-west. Its capital, Nouakchott, on the Atlantic coast, is home to 28% of the country's population. 90% of its territory is situated in the Sahara Desert, with vast stretches of pastoral land and only 0.5% arable land. Its population density is only 5 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>.

Mauritania's climate is arid to hyperarid, with two distinct seasons: a hot season from March to October, when temperatures can exceed 40°C in the desert, and a cool season from November to February, with averages of 25 to 30°C. Annual rainfall varies considerably, from 100 mm in the north to 600 mm in the south, exacerbating the challenges of desertification and water stress. Most of its population of approximately 4.5 million people lives in the temperate south of the country, with more than 57% of the population living in urban areas.

Mauritanian society is multi-ethnic, made up mainly of three groups: the Bidhanes ('white Moors', 30%), the Haratines ('black Moors', 40%) and various sub-Saharan groups (Halpulaar, Soninké, Wolof, 30%). Arabic is the country's official language, although French is widely used in administration and local languages dominate in the south.

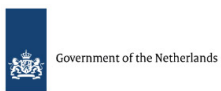
Historically, Mauritania was a [crossroads](#) between the Ghana and Mali empires. It was a French protectorate in 1903 and later gained independence in 1960. Its post-colonial history has been one of several coups d'état (1978, 2005, 2008) and a gradual trend toward democracy, cemented by the 1991 Constitution.

In 2019, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani was elected president in the country's first peaceful transition. Mauritania's politics are based on a semi-presidential republic form. The president holds office for five years, renewable once, and the country has a bicameral parliament with the 157-member National Assembly. The legal system is a blend of French civil law and Sharia law. Though there has been development in democracy, problems still exist, including entrenched slavery ([about 90 000 people in 2018](#)), restriction of civil liberties and corruption. Following the 2024 elections, Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani, former Chairman-in-Office of the African Union (AU), [is](#) continuing his efforts to fight corruption, empower young people and improve education, agricultural transformation and security.

Mauritania's geopolitics are dominated by liberal ideologies, reinforced by multilateral institutions that support inclusive policies and free trade. Mauritania has been a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 31 May 1995. Mauritania ratified the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, which entered into force on 1 January 2021. Mauritania joined the Arab League in 1973, and Arabic is the country's official language. Mauritania is also a member of the United Nations and the AU.

Mauritania's economy is mainly based on mining, which accounts for around 30% of GDP. The country is a major exporter of iron (10% of world exports), as well as gold and copper. Mauritania has been listed by the [World Bank](#) as a lower-middle-income country (LMIC) since 1995. Mauritania's GDP per capita stood at US\$5 183 in 2023.

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## About the authors

Dr Pierre Christian Tsopmo is a Research Consultant at AFI. He holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Yaounde II-Soa. He is a Development Economist with keen interest in political economy analysis, African governance and politics of development, natural resource management, social cohesion, climate vulnerability, climate mitigation, climate governance, sectorial forecasting analysis, FDI, growth, institutions compliance, state fragility, illicit flows and tax literacy, among others.

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