



Mauritania

Country Facts

History

According to archaeological finds, there is evidence of early settlements established in modern-day Mauritania as far back as the Neolithic era. Light-skinned nomads of the Berber tribes only inhabited the north of Mauritania from 2000 BC onwards. At that time, the northern part was inhabited by immigrant Wolof and Soninke who lived from hunting, cattle breeding and agriculture. The Berber tribes united in pre-Christian times and formed a kingdom in the north, the indigenous peoples were increasingly displaced. In the 8th century AD, the Arabs arrived in the north, whose aim was to Islamise the Berbers. From the 9th century, the Berbers of the Sanhājah tribe dominated the region and took control of the trade caravans in the north of what is now Mauritania. The southern part belonged to the great empire of Ghana, which was founded around 600 AD on Soninké territory. The wealthy rulers resided in Koumbi Saleh, whose ruins are located in southern Mauritania. The trade in gold in particular made Ghana a rich country, which in its heyday in the 11th century stretched from the Senegal River in the west to the banks of the Niger in the east and reached far into the Sahara in the north.

The name "Mauritania" comes from the Moors. As a transitional country between white North Africa and black West Africa, the country was an important centre of the salt and gold trade, and also for the Trans-Saharan slave trade.

In the 11th century and after the dissolution of the Sanhājah League, the Berber people of the Almoravids founded an empire which extended as far as northern Spain. However, the disintegration of this empire began as early as the middle of the 12th century. As a result, the northern part fell to Morocco and the southern part belonged to the kingdom of Mali, whose foundation was laid at the beginning of the 13th century by the Mande king Soundiata Keita.

During his reign, the empire extended from the Fouta Djallon mountains in present-day Guinea to the Niger River delta. However, the most important and powerful ruler of Mali was Kankan Moussa, who made a legendary pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324/25, distributing so much gold that the price of gold collapsed. During his rule, the Mali empire was at its zenith, possessing immense wealth thanks to its gold mines and the trade in salt and slaves, and stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the borders of today's Nigeria. It was also a time of peace, in which important buildings were created and the arts flourished. Kankan Moussa's successors were unable to consolidate their power, and the decline of the great Mali Empire began at the beginning of the 15th century. At the same time, a wave of Arab immigration began from the north, pushing Berbers and Africans southwards. Towards the end of the 16th century, one of these Arab groups, the Banī Hassān, controlled the entire territory of present-day Mauritania.

For several centuries, French interest in Mauritania focused on trade, especially gum arabic. In the 19th century, they occupied regions in southern Mauritania and only after decades of fighting did France proclaim Mauritania as a possession in 1904 and declared it part of the French colony of French West Africa in 1929. As a colony, the country became member of the French Union after the Second World War. In 1946, citizens were given the right to vote for the first time. The first elections were held in Mauritania in 1957. On 28th November 1960, the country gained its independence. From 20th May 1961, women were also allowed to vote. In that year Mokhtar Ould Daddah was elected President and head of government. The founding of the new capital Nouakchott, which developed from a village of 500 inhabitants into a city of millions within a few decades, also dates from this time.

In 1963, Mauritania was a founding member of the OAU, the Organization of African Unity, which saw itself as an advocate of the decolonization of Africa. Two years later, Mauritania distanced itself from France both militarily and economically. In 1974, all contracts with France were terminated and the copper and iron mines previously managed by French companies were nationalised. The year before, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania had become a member of the "Arab League", which advocated war against Israel.

Already in the 1960s, there were repeated border conflicts with Morocco over the Spanish overseas province in the north of the country - now called Western Sahara. After the Spanish withdrawal from Spanish Sahara, Morocco and Mauritania agreed on a new border demarcation after further armed conflicts in 1976 and accordingly annexed areas of the country. A guerrilla movement under the name POLISARIO (Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saqiya al-Hamra y del Río de Oro), supported by Algeria, Libya and some black African states, rebelled against this. A bloody war broke out, the devastating consequences of which led to the overthrow of Moktar Ould Daddah by the military in 1978. The military placed the state authority in the hands of a "Military Committee for National Reconstruction" led by General Mustafa Ould Mohammed Salkek. In the next few years, there were repeated military coups. In 1979, Mauritania withdrew its claims to the part of Western Sahara it occupied and ordered its troops out of the country. Morocco then annexed the regions formerly claimed by Mauritania.

Further coups followed, from which Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmad Taya emerged as the new military ruler in 1984. But domestic and foreign political unrest continued: in 1989, disputes on the border with Senegal led to serious unrest, and at the same time the conflicts between the light-skinned Moorish upper class and the oppressed black minority in the country intensified. In the early 1990s, Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmad Taya responded with democratic reforms and a policy of internal reconciliation, which resulted in a new democratic constitution in 1991. In the first direct elections, he was confirmed as head of state for six years, with the opposition accusing him of electoral fraud.

In 1992, Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar, leader of the democratic social party PRDS, became the new head of government after winning the National Assembly and Senate elections. In 1996, Sheik Al-Afia Ould Mohammed Khouna followed as head of government, and the following year, President Maaouiya Ould Sid' Ahmad Taya was confirmed in elections. Mohammed Lemine Ould Bah Ould Guig was appointed by him the new head of government for a period of one year, and in 1997 Mohammed Khouna returned to office as head of government.

In partial Senate elections in 2000, the ruling party was confirmed, and for the first time a woman entered the Islamic State Senate. In the 2001 National Assembly elections, the ruling PRDS won an absolute majority. Since this election, unlike the previous parliamentary elections, was not boycotted by the opposition parties, it is considered the first step towards a multi-party democracy.

On August 3, 2005, Ely Ould Mohamed Vall took power while Ahmed Taya was on a state visit to Saudi Arabia.

In April 2007, a new president, Abdallahi, was introduced and a new government was formed. For the first time in the country's history, there was a change of government through elections. But already in August 2008, there was a new coup, and General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz came to power. A year later, new elections were organized in which the general was confirmed in office. This was the starting point for a new democracy in which Mauritania now lives. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz also won the 2014 elections. After two terms in office, he did not run again in 2019, in accordance with the constitution. Mohamed Ould Ghazouani won the elections and is still Acting President.

Population

In 2020, the country had a population of about 5 million inhabitants, of which 50.3% were male and 49.7% female. Arab, Berber and black African ethnic groups can be found in Mauritania. These ethnic groups have mixed strongly, so it seems almost impossible to give percentages of individual ethnic groups. 30% of the population in Mauritania are light-skinned Moors and Berbers, another 30% belong to the black ethnic groups of the Bambara, Serer, Soninke, Peulh, Toucouleur and 40% are dark-skinned Moors.

The two upper classes Hassani (warriors) and Marabout (Islamic scholars) make up about 70% of the total population of Mauritania. The rest of the population is divided into Wolof (on the coast in the southwest), Toucouleur (in the Senegalese river valley), Soninke (in the far south), Fulani (spread throughout the south) and other small population groups.

While in the 1950s about 90 percent of the population were nomadic and there were no major cities, the nomadic way of life in tents is in very sharp decline.

The growth rate of the Mauritanian population is high (2.9%), similar to most African countries, with each woman giving birth to at least six children on average. Due to infectious diseases such as hepatitis, malaria and meningitis, the child mortality rate is about 7%. Life expectancy in Mauritania is about 64 years.

Religions

Islam is the state religion of Mauritania. About 99% of the population are Sunni Muslims. In addition, there are also followers of the natural religions, who are roughly 17,300 Mauritians. Christians also live in Mauritania, most of them Catholics, but their share of the population is very small.

Languages

The official language is Arabic, which has replaced French, the official lingua franca spoken during the colonial period. French, however, remains the language of instruction alongside Arabic. In everyday life, Hassania, a Moorish variant of Arabic, is mainly spoken.

The Western Atlantic languages Pulaar and Wolof, which belong to the Niger-Congo language family, as well as the Mande language Soninke are also recognized national languages. The Berber languages Imeraguen and Zenaga are still spoken but less and less frequently.

Plant Life and Wildlife

While Mauritania was originally an area rich in animals and plants, due to the strong deforestation, the country has gradually become a desert.

Plant Life

Because of the drought, only trees and plants that can survive the great lack of water, such as acacias or tamarisks, grow in Mauritania. The tree genus *Prosopis* is also present in Mauritania. This tree owes its survival in this dry region to its extremely long roots, which search for water up to 150 metres deep in the earth. Date palms grow mainly in the oases. They produce ripe fruit in the summer months and the leaves are used for the construction of shelters. Baobabs, also called monkey bread trees, *Raphia* palms and bamboo can be found along the Senegal River. The baobab is considered a sacred tree throughout Africa. Every part of the tree is useful. The fibres of the bark are woven into mats, the pulp of the fruit is rich in vitamins and provides a refreshing juice, the calcium-rich young leaves are used in cooking and the roots are employed to make traditional medicine. There are three types of acacias. Their branches also serve as toothbrushes.

Wildlife

In the savannahs and desert steppes there are still various mammal species such as warthogs, gazelles or African wildcats. The dunes are home to scorpions and numerous species of snakes. Furthermore, Nile crocodiles have been discovered in Mauritania, which mostly live at natural water points in the Sahara, so-called gueltas. They take advantage of the low rainfall and survive in cool crevices under the ground during the dry season. Mauritania has two important national parks. The largest is Banc d'Arguin National Park, located directly on the Atlantic coast. This park was designated a national park in 1976 and has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1989. Its coastal swamps, shallow coastal waters and

offshore islands are the ideal wintering area for numerous migratory birds from northern Europe, Greenland and even Siberia. In addition to the Eurasian whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*), for which the park is the most important wintering quarter, the greater flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*), the great white pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*), the broad-billed sandpiper (*Calidris falcinellus*), as well as Caspian, royal and gull-billed terns (*Hydroprogne caspia*, *Sterna maxima*, *Gelochelidon nilotica*) have their breeding grounds here. More than two million migratory birds come to the park every year to spend the winter. Mammals also live in the dune landscape of the park, including the Dorcas gazelles (*Gazella dorcas*), which are classified as endangered and whose population comprises about 200 animals. In addition, there are omnivore species such as the African golden wolf (*Canis anthus*) and the fennec fox (*Vulpes zerda*), carnivore species like the Rüppell fox (*Vulpes rueppellii*) and the sand cat (*Felis margarita margarita*), the African wildcat (*Felis lybica lybica*) as well as the common genet (*Genetta genetta*). The rare predominantly nocturnal striped hyenas (*Hyaena hyaena*) is also found here. Other mammal species in the park are the African striped weasel (*Poecilogale albinucha*) and honey badgers (*Mellivora capensis*). At Cap Blanc there is a small colony of the endangered Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*). The park also houses several marine turtle species and dolphins. The sea here is extraordinarily rich in fish.

The second largest park in Mauritania is Diawling National Park, which includes the delta of the Senegal River. This 16000-hectare Diawling Park was established in 1991 and has been designated as a Ramsar site since 1994. This park is known for its diversity of fish. Since 2005 it has been connected to the Senegalese National Parks Djoudj, Langue de Barbarie and the Reserve Gueumbel to form a transboundary biosphere reserve. Here, too, over 220 different bird species, including flamingos, are found. This park is the only place in the country, where many primates and warthogs (*Phacochoerus africanus*) are still native. Wild donkeys (*Equus africanus*) are also found here.

In the dunes there are numerous scorpions and snake species, including the harmless African house snake (*Boaedon fuliginosus*) and the highly venomous *Avicenna viper* (*Cerastes vipera*).

Geography

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is a state in Northwestern Africa on the Atlantic Ocean. It borders Algeria in the northeast, Mali in the east and southeast, the strip of Western Sahara in the north and northwest and Senegal in the south. The country is 1,030,700 km² in size which means that it is more than four times the size of the UK and, with the exception of a thornbush savannah zone from the capital Nouakchott along the southern border, consists of desert. Only 10% of the land is a forested area.. Almost 38% is used as meadows or pasture land. Despite the size of the land, only 0.2% is used as arable land or fields, especially vegetables, millet, rice, and dates are grown here. 50% of the land is desert and uninhabited. The only river in the country that also carries water is the Senegal. It forms the border with the Republic of Senegal in southern Mauritania. At 915 m, Kediet Ijill is the highest elevation in the country. It is one of the many inselbergs scattered throughout the Sahara. In addition, there are the sandstone plateaus of Adrar, Tagant and Affollé in the centre of the country. The coastal area is flat in the south, while in the north you will find cliffs with offshore islands and bays.

Economy

Mauritania is one of the poorest countries in the world. About 42% of the population live below the poverty line. About 50% of the population practice agriculture in the area of the Senegal River. A large part of the population in the north of the country lives from livestock farming, which mainly includes sheep, goats, cattle and camels. The livestock breeders are predominantly nomads or semi-nomads. Mauritania's three main economic sectors are agriculture, fishing and ore mining. The food crops grown in the Senegal Delta are mainly millet, rice, maize and various types of pulses. Due to the overall poor soil conditions in the country, very few vegetables are grown; most of the vegetables are imported.

The country's most important mineral resource is iron ore; copper and gold are also mined. Oil has been discovered off the coast of Mauritania and has been produced since 2006. Mauritania set up its own

fishing fleet in the 1970s, but it proved less profitable than awarding concessions to foreign companies. As in Senegal, the fishing sector is threatened by overfishing of the waters. Agriculture accounted for 22.5% of gross domestic product in 2017, with industry contributing 37.8% and services 39.7%. In the same year, imports were more than USD 500 million higher than exports. Most of the imports are petroleum products and industrial goods. The main export product is iron ore, followed by fish, gold and copper.