The Mauritanian Civil State in Crisis
The Gulf between Society and State

ABSTRACT  The Mauritanian national state emerged as a questionable entity in both its historical and social legitimacy. This article considers the cliental relationship that remains within today’s Mauritanian national state and which dominates the political arena. The national state implements the same colonial policy and thereby has become the biggest client, offering favors for obedience and allegiance to it. Today, this is the greatest challenge Mauritania faces to break free from traditional political practice and move towards democratization and a peaceful transfer of power, the separation of powers, the rule of law, and the independence of the judiciary.

KEYWORDS: identity, political participation, peaceful transfer of power, state, traditional practices of power, separation of powers

It is generally agreed among scholars and observers that the Mauritanian national state emerged as a questionable entity in both its historical and social legitimacy. This has caused serious repercussions, which have taken shape in ethnic, tribal, and territorial conflicts that the country continues to suffer to this today.

Mauritania’s failure to institutionalize and legalize the national–urban state, despite all the efforts made in the areas of security and administration, is mainly due to a lack of political transparency, separation of powers, tyranny, tribal and ethnic domination of the political scene, and the distorted modernization left by the colonial administration that drove the tribes to serve the colonizer in collecting taxes in exchange for enhanced tribal status, which the tribal chief (Sheikh), in turn, shared with other tribal chiefs. Thus, a distorted cliental relationship has come about between the tribes and the administration that enables chiefs to exercise tyranny and repression over their fellow citizens, turning them into mere servants and spies used by the colonial administration.
for a meagre share of the tax revenues and local political influence (Ould Salem 2014a, 5).

This article considers that this cliental relationship still remains within today’s Mauritanian national state and dominates the political arena, since the national state implements the same colonial policy and thereby has become the biggest client, offering favors for obedience and allegiance to it. Today, this is the greatest challenge Mauritania faces in order to break free from traditional political practice and move towards democratization and a peaceful transfer of power, the separation of powers, the rule of law, and independence of the judiciary.

The “clientele” relationship between the national state and tribal individuals that has favored the logic of clienteles and favoritism over rights and duties has taken its toll on the Mauritanian national state. The country suffers from a severe structural crisis that has thwarted all attempts towards political and social modernization, paralyzing the society and dispersing and suppressing its political authority (Ould Salem 2014a, 6).

The symptoms of this crisis are mainly visible through the national economy and revenue, which are managed vaguely and “officially” embezzled through deals struck with senior military figures to gain their favor; the biased judiciary and its use as a mechanism to achieve political and social gains; and social integration policies that failed through the poor treatment they received from the national state; and the increasingly thorny issue of identity. According to Ould Salem (2014a, 6), rather than being social, political, and cultural, the powers that be function from the perspective of their clienteles rather than using dialogue and a proper understanding of the community.

All these contradictions on which the Mauritanian national state was built made it volatile, vulnerable, and prone to erupt at any given time. The gap between the state and society only deepened, with rivalry and tensions between the local Mauritanian tribes fueled by the nationalization of colonial policy. Thus, the country is now also threatened by external interference on the pretext of the instability of the national state.

Although the Mauritanian state was originally civil during the period 1957–78, that period, however, was far from ideal, as it sought to implement colonial policy and eliminate the historical role of local jurists and business people. This “civil” period led to a toppling of the balance that existed between Mauritanian civil institutions and political ones.

Furthermore, during this period, the one-party policy prevailed and political/social diversity was eliminated, with all the consequences that ensue from
such a context. Prior resignation from parliament became common, which was a system whereby a parliament member submitted his resignation in an undated written letter in advance to the head of state. This was a means of controlling parliamentary members and to isolate them if necessary. This is testimony of the extent of the tyranny and corruption that was prevalent within the Mauritanian patriarchal system at that time.

The crisis of the state only seemed to deepen as the military regime came to power in 1978, which implemented more authoritarian and tyrannical measures and eliminated various other civil organizations.

During this period began what is referred to here as the “ambivalence of military and policies,” as in the politicization of the military and the militarization of society, that is, making society give support to military legitimacy.

Although the Mauritanian regime in the 1990s was to some extent considered to be democratically extrovert, this openness was not due to a greater awareness of community interests as much as it was imposed by abroad, especially after the La Baule summit in 1990, which explains the rapid setback in the democratic system or, more precisely, the indirect rise of the military regime after the coup d’état of August 3, 2005.

This study addresses the crises that have impeded the Mauritanian national state’s endeavors to bring about a civil state at various levels: primarily socio-cultural and then political-economic. Its emphasis is to provide scientific and practical explanations for the failure of the Mauritanian model and its inability to break free from the traditional political practice of government to move towards democratization and a peaceful transfer of power. The study is based on the hypothesis that assumes that the failure of the civil state in Mauritania is mainly due to the inability of the state and its institutions to absorb the movement of society, because of disharmony between the history of the state, which was put in place by foreign elements, and its ancient Arab society.

IMPACT OF THE STATE’S CRISIS ON SOCIETY AND CULTURE

From the very outset, Mauritania came into being as a divided country, as its people were left to suffer from the French colonial policies that still prevail to this day. There was a dilemma in building the national state: the fledgling state suffered from an inherent contradiction that the distorted modernization coming via the colonizer was in direct conflict with the historical social and cultural backgrounds and the reality of Mauritanian Bedouin society. This dissonance between the history of the national state and Mauritanian
society made the nascent state appear in the eyes of the elites, especially the traditionalists, as lacking any legitimacy as it inherited the colonial state and made its first steps under the supervision of the colonizer. Thus, the national state was deprived of community loyalty, resorted to controlling the various civil activities through the policy of “one-party,” and tightened its grip on society, especially after eliminating any form of political and social pluralism in 1965.

The national state inherited the colonial administration and remained loyal to a Jacobean government approach, which emphasizes the control of parties and institutional action by attracting them towards the capital, while employing a very complex and laborious bureaucracy (Ould Salem 2014b, 538). The first test the national state had to face was only six years after it came into being: the explosion of the cultural and ethnic issue. This was an indication that the state had failed to resolve the traditional consensus between the regime and the tribal clans, and in incorporating them within the state apparatus (539).

However, matters related to cultural and linguistic rights cannot be postponed or attenuated by courteous slogans. Rather, they need to be addressed through a real and public discussion that leads to their constitutionalization, institutionalization, and an agreement between political and cultural elites within minority and majority groups, without resorting to violence or repression (539).

It can be said that the most significant and crucial aspects of the Mauritanian civil state crisis that plagues both social and cultural domains are mainly due to cultural, ethnic, and social differences between the different groups of Mauritanian society, the state’s exploitation of this matter for immediate political gains, the tribal influence on both political and social scenes, and the state’s inability to contain them.

The Cultural Issue in Mauritania (The Dilemma of Civil Harmony)

First, it is important to stress that the ethnic, cultural, and social crisis in Mauritania is a colonial legacy. While the French administration was in Mauritania, it hired some African administrative officers from West Africa, despite their lack of Mauritanian citizenship, which sowed seeds of ethnic and cultural hostility between the Arabs and the Africans. Thus, conflict spread between the Arab elite and the African administrators left by the colonial

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1. The Jacobin style of government came into force in France after the French Revolution.
administration in West Africa, while the African Mauritanian national elite had the same values and principles that Arabs and Islam abided by (such was the case with the Fulani Tribe) (Ould Salem 2014b, 530). This truth is reflected in the words of the African leader Basemboli: “There is no hostile attitude between the Africans towards the Arabs, in fact, the people of Fota love Arabic and train scholars; all our heritage is written in Arabic.”

The cultural crisis in Mauritania was first ignited on January 30, 1965, when a decision was issued to make Arabic compulsory in secondary education. The African students at Nouakchott High School responded on January 4, 1966, with a series of demonstrations. At the same time, nineteen leading African figures signed a publication criticizing the current tally that stated that the Arabs accounted for more than eighty percent of the population, and opposed the compulsory enforcement of the Arabic language. Describing it as a means aimed at targeting the ethnic minority, and reflecting a so-called Arab “superiority complex” regarding the efficiency of Africans, they demanded the implementation of an educational system specifically tailored for African communities (Ould Salem 2014a, 89).

Both sides were extremely agitated and stressed to an extent that blinded them from rational thinking and action. The clashes between the Arab and African students quickly escalated and got out of the control of the police and the national guard, forcing the army’s intervention (Ould Abah 1995, 121). In fact, the clash between the Africans and Arabs was mainly due to economic reasons, as the African employees were concerned for their positions being taken by new Arab entrants, especially so as the national state suffered from institutional and legal failure and could not contain the cultural, educational, and racial and identity issues (Ould Salem 2014b, 540). Thus, the state in Mauritania completely failed to build a national–civic school that enforces social integration while acknowledging the rights of the various components of society (541).

In our view, this failure is because the national state has dealt with this public issue through unconventional authoritarian norms, rather than through dialogue, and respect for cultural specificities. As is the case in most African countries, ethnic and cultural aspects remain to this day the main issues impeding the construction of a national–civil state enforced by national rights, obligations, and national ties.
Tribe Versus State

When dealing with Third World societies in general, the dominance of traditional (tribal) patterns over the political landscape should always be considered because it impedes political practice. The individual in these societies is torn between the two affiliations of the tribal and the political; this duality causes him/her much embarrassment and prevents conscious political behavior governed by principle, logic, and successful experiences (Ould Sidi Bab 2005, 234).

The national state tried to transcend the tribe and contain it—as was clearly reflected in the speech of the elected President Ould Daddah on Independence Day on November 28, 1960, which stated: “We must develop the meaning of solidarity and the concept of public interest, so that we can ascend from the tribe to the state” (Ould Sidi Bab 2005, 235). Yet, the tribal system remains inextricably embedded generation after generation, and is not just immune but adaptable to all foreign bodies. So far, the tribal community in Mauritania has managed to contain all regulations, even the state itself is subject to containment (Ould El Sa’ad, El-Mokhtar, and Abdel-Hay 2009, 18).

Thus, the state remains unable to encompass the tribal community and subject it to its absolute sovereignty. Some believe that this is due to the absence of the economic factor that drives society to bend to the wealth of the state.

The Gulf States represent a similar example in that social factors similar to those in Mauritanian society are present.

In Mauritania, the “tribe” phenomenon, often dominated by primitive pluralism, has made modern political pluralism almost impossible to achieve. This has ultimately led to the impossibility of any form of competition with the tribe.

It is important to note that the “tribe” phenomenon is not the only difficult issue that Mauritania faces; the politicization of the tribe is yet another. Mauritanians are not ready to part from the tribe since it comprises an integral part of both their past and present. The tribe is the result of the historical development of Mauritanian society, and, in contrast to other Arab countries, no one in Mauritania wishes for its demise (Ould Sidi Bab 2005, 236).

In spite of the increasing importance of the tribe in Mauritania, it has had low impact in terms of the kind of violence that would lead to the collapse of the state, as was the case of Somalia, or state floundering during periods of severe crises, as was the case in Sudan or Algeria. Tribal reprisal (Qisa) was not a prevalent occurrence, as was the case in some Arab countries such as Yemen.
Indeed, tribes in Mauritania have remained demilitarized since the founding of the state (236).

While the political reforms brought about by democratization introduced modernity to Mauritanian political practice, its application in this country continued to flounder under the weight of the tribe, prompting some specialists to call the experience of Mauritanian democracy “tribal democracy” (237).

The tribe’s influence over the Mauritanian political scene had a part in the deterioration of the administration and in hampering any efforts to modernize it. Since independence, the authorities have not been able to prevent traditional practices from accessing the administration (237). Hence, the tribe has remained in control of the situation, since the Mauritanian state either had nothing to offer society in order to win control over political activity, or did have something to offer, but it was mismanaged and failed to achieve social justice. Therefore, the tribe emerged stronger than the state in the competition to win over the loyalty of members of Mauritanian society (237). Nonetheless, the political practice under tribal influence will continue to suffer as it cannot succeed in playing a significant role in public life; thus, political failure will become a dominant feature in all political practices in Mauritania, unless a solution in the form of political awareness free from tribal ties is adopted (239). The national state, since its very inception, has had to deal with the tribal issue. As evidenced in his initiation speech at the Congress of Aleg on May 2, 1958, former President Ould Daddah said: “Gentlemen of the government, local advisors and tribal sheikhs, here we gather so that from the struggle of ideas a holy unity may emerge for the free citizens of Mauritania […]”

Ould Daddah sought aid from the tribal chieftains to overpower his political opponents. After getting rid of the political opposition by implementing the one-party policy, he then sought to limit the influence of tribal chieftains and deprive them of the privileges they previously enjoyed. When the military came to power, it sought to replace the tribe, but after a period it returned to the tribe to escape isolation.

With the arrival of the 1980s, the “tribe” phenomenon was regarded in an unprecedented way. All the democratic events that the country had experienced since the 1990s were seen to be a reflection of tribal conflicts and rivalries, in which the elements of social heritage played their role, and existing regimes sought to take advantage of it through the use of political strings, turning it into an exploitable card by offering positions in financial and administrative governmental institutions (Ould Ibrahim 2014, 94). These actions brought the tribe back to the forefront, with statesmen having more
loyalty to the tribe and began to market tribal values and loyalty in the political field (95). The “tribe” managed to survive and thrive in Mauritanian political life despite the modernization and rapid transformations experienced by Mauritanian society, especially after independence, mainly due to its ability to adapt to any new situation and exploit new mechanisms to ensure its interests in political and social arenas. Such mechanisms included the military establishment, political parties, unions, etc., in addition to the state’s continued inability to control the social environment from independence to the present day. It is commonly known that any weakness in a centralized system will inevitably lead to the rising influence of tribal communities and their dominance over the political field.

Supposedly, the independence of the Mauritanian state was meant to diminish the influence of the tribe in favor of the state and to free the Mauritanian citizen from his tribal bonds and allegiance. Yet, the reality indicates quite the opposite. Ever since the independence of the Mauritanian state and till this day, Mauritanians are increasingly becoming more attached to the tribe, and more committed to its values and customs (Ould Ibrahim 2014, 95). Thus, the national state has failed to dismantle traditional structures and replace tribalism with citizenship.

Although the Mauritanian national state has known political and social pluralism since early times in its political history, this pluralism has contributed to the perpetuation of traditional or tribal pluralism, which made party leaders appeal to their tribes to win elections; hence, a new concept in the field of African studies came to be: “the tribe as a political power,” as men of politics in both Arab and African societies realized the need to employ tribalism to achieve political gains. This was also initially applied by Mokhtar Ould Daddah, who first used the tribal leaders as a means to put pressure on his opponents by inviting tribal chieftains to every meeting of a political nature.

**IMPACT OF THE STATE’S CRISIS ON POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LEVELS**

The various constitutions that have emerged since the independence of the Mauritanian state to this day constitute an obstacle to effective political practice. They did not reflect the Mauritanian social content in general, but rather the whims and interests of a ruling minority. For example, the Constitution of March 22, 1959, and the Constitution of May 20, 1961, established a strict
individual regime that does not allow for effective political participation; this ultimately led to the one-party domination over the political arena on February 12, 1965 (Ould Sidi Bab 2005, 230).

The 1961 Constitution also established an unbalanced system in favor of the president, making him the sole ruler of the country and free to implement his own policy, subjecting all other political and administrative authorities to his will and taking away the authority of the national assembly in forcing him to resign (230). The situation continued until 1978 when a military dictatorship of a monopolistic nature emerged, during which autocracy and unilater- alism prevailed.

All Mauritanian constitutional reforms since the 1990s that might have allowed political and social pluralism (i.e., the establishment of political parties and unions and civil society organizations) were quickly shattered after one-party rule was consolidated, in the absence of a peaceful process for power transition, democratic practice in society, and serious political will, with the ruling regime insisting on staying in power (Ould Al-Salik 2014, 105).

Moreover, the Constitution of July 20, 1991, which still applies today, and despite the amendments made to it since, still remained in favor of the executive power; the head of state was given additional privileges beyond those granted by democratic constitutions. Moreover, the Constitution of May 20, 1991, was not due to the developing society’s internal structures; rather, it was dictated from outside, especially by France at the La Baule summit. French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas, who went to Mauritania to oversee this task, announced to Le Monde, immediately after stepping out of Colonel Maaouya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya’s office, the start of the democratic process in Mauritania (Ould El Sa’ad et al. 2009, 39).

Hence, the openness the country witnessed at that time was merely a proactive plan taken by the regime to ensure its survival in government. This explains the return to military coups, the most being the coup of August 6, 2008.

The crisis of the civil state in Mauritania is not something new, but rather one of many crises that have plagued the country since its founding, and which worsen with every mistake made by each successive government. That being so, it makes sense to concentrate on identifying the effects these crises have on society and particularly on the political and economic levels. The most prominent of these are as discussed below.
The Abolition of Political and Social Pluralism and the Adoption of One-Party Rule

The Mauritanian state adopted the one-party policy as a mechanism for state-building and eliminated all aspects of political and social pluralism that existed after the colonial era, thus putting an end to various political parties such as Hizb Al-Taqadom, Hizb Al-Nahda, Al-Hizb Al-Ishtiraki, and Al-Hizb Al-Watani. Although the authorities at the time justified this by stating that the main reason behind the one-party model was the recent Mauritanian era and lack of awareness, this view is questionable as those new to power need to experiment with multiple visions and methods of political practice (El Salik and El Amine 2017, 11). Dealing with several different points of view and presenting alternatives to the process of exercising power are factors that enhance the public’s political awareness and their choice of leaders. Moreover, the multiplicity of parties urge the latter to compete to achieve victory, which gives weight and meaning to the public’s political choices. This prevents them being used merely as tools that only do the bidding of the single party and practice change in line with its philosophy of governance (11).

The truth in fact was that the adoption of the one-party policy by most of the African and Arab countries at that time was to eliminate the opposition; the same can be said about the Mauritanian case, and what the elected former president Ould Daddah resorted to with absolute support from the French. The forced the unification of political parties behind the political unity slogans raised by Hizb Al-Sha’ab (the People’s Party) was to counteract regional conspiracies and ambitions. The slogans included, among others, the Moroccan threat coming from the north! Ould Daddah pursued this with a series of civil coups on political pluralism and unions and strengthened his personal authority by controlling all political institutions both constitutionally and legally (Ould Salem 2014a, 78–79).

These actions thwarted the democratic dream in Mauritania and quelled any hopes of ever achieving pluralism and establishing a monolithic approach. In this regard, El Salik and El Amine (2017, 12) noted the extent to which the founders of the one-party rule in Mauritania were influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s views on the aristocratic ruling system, in which power would lie in the hands of the few privileged elites. This later led to the struggle for power within the elites which represented one of the most significant manifestations of the Mauritanian political crisis.
The 1960s and early 1970s represented the beginning of what could be called power personalization and the institutionalization of patriarchal logic in Mauritanian politics.

Timid Political Participation Due to Power Monopolization and Power Personalization

It is a known fact that democratic states are mostly distinguished by the active participation of citizens in the process of political decisions, in the sense that political decisions are the final outcome of debates carried out in society, to maintain a balance between the legislative, executive, and judicial powers. This has led jurists and constitutional law experts to consider that any system in which the former mentioned characteristics are absent is one driven by personalization and individualism. To illustrate this, we borrow the words of Montesquieu when he wrote: “Every authority needs a parallel power able to put a stop to it if it ever deviates” (El Salik and El Amine 2017, 19).

Political participation is given high importance in the field of political science and is viewed as the most effective measure through which to credit the political system with legitimacy. The more political participation is expanded to cover the diverse political spectrum and social classes, the more democratic the system would be. Conversely, the less political participation, the further the gap will widen between the state and the social forces until an individualistic approach to power is reached and embodied through the following manifestations.

Monopolization of Power

The concept of power monopolization does not raise an issue as it simply contradicts the separation-of-powers concept that is applied in proper political systems. However, an issue lies in how this concept was adapted and to what extent in Mauritanian political practice, irrespective of whether it meant absolute distinction between the legislative and executive authorities, or the taking of control of the electoral process in order to produce a legislative authority that solely existed to ratify the will of the executive authority. Taking a closer look at Mauritanian political experiences, it is noticeable that political practice was monopolized, especially between 1978–92 and 2005–07. Ruling parties enforced unilateralism and condemned other political and social organizations that did not accept its hegemony.

Note that the constitution of May 20, 1961, was revised on January 11, 1965, to constitutionalize this monopolization. Thus, the 9th article of this constitution states: “The popular will is realized by the democratic party
organized of the state, the Mauritanian People’s Party (Hizb Al-Sha’ab), born from the unification of national parties on 25 December, which is the only party recognized by the state.”

This power monopolization is clearly evident from the fact that since 1960 and up to 2007, the Mauritanian parliament did not overrule any government or reject any law that was put forward (El Salik and El Amine 2017, 21). Three hypotheses, therefore, become evident. First, either all governments were efficient or rational with distinct achievements, and thus were wildly accepted—a phenomenon never seen before even in countries rich in economic resources, while Mauritania’s people are classified as the poorest in the world. Second, the constitution does not give parliament the right to overthrow governments. This completely contradicts Mauritanian constitutions, especially those of 1959 and 1991. Third, parliament has been constructed in such a way that it has no other option but to agree (22). This latter hypothesis is the most applicable to the Mauritanian political experiment.

The Power of Authority Personified

Personification of power means the absolute linkage between the ruler’s personality and the state which combines both the public and the private spheres. This notion was encapsulated in a famous statement by Louis XVI of France: “L’État, c’est moi” (I am the State). The degree to which the power of the authorities is personified in the political system is often measured by two criteria: the extent to which citizens contribute to the political process—each according to their ability, qualifications, and location—and the extent to which the people’s representatives contribute within the authority’s power structure (El Salik and El Amine 2017, 24). The degree to which these standards apply in Mauritania’s political practice is considered below.

Political parties and the voting process are often the most important mechanisms through which political participation is carried out in modern countries, where political participation is negatively or positively affected by the various political visions, backgrounds, and the ruling regimes’ willingness to make way for collective frameworks to express these ideas, as well as attempting to center on decision-making through the electoral process in order to implement their vision.

The criteria to measure the actual authority and behavior of the people’s representatives can only be achieved when the electoral system is transparent enough to reflect the will of the electorate. In appraising the Mauritanian experience and the basis of the political system and political practice, it is
feasible to say that the Mauritanian political system did not allow the formation of parties until the announcement in 1991 of the democratization series, after the La Baule summit; that participation was in favor of those in power.

The personalization of power that has dominated the political practice in Mauritania is seen by some as the main reason for the legitimacy crisis in the political system caused by the regime’s poor performance and the marginalization of citizens by reducing the latter to a mere expendable tool (El Salik and El Amine 2017, 26). From these data it can be concluded that the Mauritanian political system invalidates the votes before rigging elections.

Absence of Institutions
The absence of institutions is also a manifestation of the civil state crisis in Mauritania; this is largely due to the state’s association with tribal and ethnic groups and their influence over state institutions, in addition to individuals’ overriding preference to belong to their tribal and ethnic group rather than to their country. The latter represents the fundamental reason that has hindered national efforts to form a modern society linked to citizenship and the concept of belonging to the country as a state and not to the traditional tribal/ethnic group.

According to Huntington, the political system depends much on its institutionalization, organization, and procedures, and the ability to adapt to various historical circumstances and periods (cited in Wahban 2000, 16). The political systems that have ensued since the establishment of Mauritania as a nation-state in the early 1960s have still not managed to institutionalize properly due to governance being personified, society militarized, and the military politicized.

Absolute Divergence Between the Civil and Military Spheres
The first coup d’état to take place in Mauritania was on July 10, 1978; it overthrew the elected president Ould Daddah and marked the actual beginning of direct contact between the civilian and military spheres in the Mauritanian political experiment. Since then, the army became the center of political life in the country. The military came to power on the pretense of ending the Desert War (Harb Al-Sahra), re-evaluating the national economy, and returning to pluralistic democracy (Ould Horma, El-Alawi, and Rahman, 2014, 10). However, these were mere slogans to mask a twisted policy adopted by the coup organizers in their search for legitimacy and approval. Since that date, the military has dominated the Mauritanian political scene and generated a
situation that has drastically altered the nature of the country’s political system and almost completely eliminated the national state project.

Political openness was declared in the 1990s, putting Mauritania on a democratic transition path—locally known as the “democratic series.” This brought Mauritania out of the era of exceptional rule to civil–democratic rule that further implemented democratization through the endorsement of the new Constitution of July 20, 1991. The establishment of political parties, the publication of newspapers, and the establishment of several civil society organizations were allowed (Ould Al-Salik 2014, 105). However, this did not eliminate the army’s control over the political scene, given that the democratic or military reforms were not based on a national initiative but in response to external demands.

A well-renowned Mauritanian researcher, Didi Ould Salik, believes that the deviation of the Mauritanian military establishment from its traditional role in protecting the country and its assets is mainly due to the fact that Mauritanian military officers who abused their authority by illegally expropriating financial aid feared trial and prosecution if they were to leave power, especially since they had a hand in corruption and stole money belonging to the Mauritanian people while leaving them to suffer in poverty (Ould Al-Salik 2014, 110). Another factor is that officers also fear legal pursuit from human rights campaigners and investigation for the violations they committed during their time in office because they influenced decision-making over the past decades (110). This is in addition to their interest in obtaining more gains and privileges during exceptional periods.

Military rule had direct repercussions on the development of the Mauritanian national state; their arrival in power has led to political, social, and economic instability.

The situation that prevailed in the country over a long period of time was due to conflicts between army leaders, mainly because of different ideological, tribal, and regional backgrounds. The political instability, which characterized the political and social life during the military’s rule, hindered the development of the civil state, as it caused a dearth in the building of expertise—a necessary step towards establishing institutions capable of managing public affairs and performing the basic functions of the state. The lack of stability also led to permanent change in state institutions, preventing the basic traditions and values necessary for democratic practice from being generated (Ould Al-Salik 2014, 112).
We believe that the dominance of the military and its strong presence on the Mauritanian political scene is mainly due to the following factors in Mauritanian political practice:

- Civil elites’ mismanagement of the economic surplus.
- Flawed Mauritanian constitutional institutions.
- Use of violence to achieve political objectives.
- Linking public offices to wealth, status, and prestige, which Jean-François Bayart called “politique du ventre” (politics of the belly) (Bayart 1989).

Theoretically, the military had not interfered in political practice in Mauritania, but in practice, the reality proved the reverse. The Mauritanian government during its cabinet meeting on July 12, 2013, ratified a draft decree to reorganize the armed and security forces during the general elections. This was agreed upon between the government and other opposing parties in their 2012 dialogue, on the condition that they would vote a day in advance of the general poll so that they would be able to maintain public security and protect the polling stations, in compliance with their legal obligation.

Based on the above, Aley Abu Farha Al-Sayid—a scholar and observer—believes that the army in Mauritania may no longer need to resort to military coups as a means to change the head of state, but instead may exercise a new right to opt for counter-elections. It is what he calls “coup by voting” (Al-Sayid 2005, 192) and what is called here “constitutionalizing the political role of the army.”

On the economic front, the structural adjustment programs imposed on developing countries generally had direct implications on the national state and its civil project, reinstating these countries to their historical role as being dependent on the outside. These programs and policies have been introduced in Africa on a large scale since the early 1980s, after the economies of developing countries generally suffered from severe accumulating crises. These programs imposed by donor countries had major repercussions on social and political situations in developing countries in general.

This has deepened the crisis of the post-colonial state, particularly Mauritania, because these policies were ambitious, and neither the state nor the national society could comply with them. Therefore, the impulsive implementation of these programs had a negative impact on the development of the civil state process in Mauritania. These programs and policies also led to the emergence of what has become known in the field of international studies
as the “concept of conditional democracy,” which was articulated in François Mitterrand’s speech at the La Baule summit when linking the provision of economic assistance to African countries and the extent to which the latter adheres to liberal values, especially those relating to democracy and human rights.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study we noted that the Mauritanian national state faced three major crises that continue to impede its endeavors towards achieving a modern political democratic state. The first crisis concerns the very existence of the Mauritanian state itself, as its creation came about not through Mauritanian society itself but was the result of a French policy that reflected the desire of France to maintain its political, economic, and cultural interests in the region, especially after most Arab and African countries gained their formal independence in the 1960s.

The second crisis concerns the legitimacy of the Mauritanian national state, since the national state project was developed under the supervision of the French colonizer. Thus, the national state may appear in the eyes of the Mauritanian elite, especially the traditional ones, as lacking in legitimacy, especially so since it inherited the colonial state and took its first steps under its supervision. This situation deprived the national state from gaining the support and loyalty of society, and later caused the gap to widen between political and social spheres, revealing a deep discrepancy between the history of the national state and its social and cultural realities.

The third crisis is mainly associated with the poor performance of the consecutive political regimes due to their inability to adjust to its local customs and social perceptions. Moreover, the political stalemate crisis and institutional rigidity made the Mauritanian state unable to absorb the shifts occurring within society and to interact with them. All these crises have had major ramifications and repercussions on the various political, social and economic levels. On the political level, the political scene in Mauritania was defined by the abolition of political pluralism and unions, the personification of power, and one-party rule in the early period of the national state.

The country witnessed some kind of openness in the 1990s after the constitution of July 20, 1991, which laid down the foundations for pluralistic democracy that allowed the establishment of political parties and the publication of newspapers. Yet, this openness quickly backfired because it was
not generated internally but was dictated externally. The new policies did not bring light into the dark tunnel with regards to the firm presence of the one-party rule, and the absence of a peaceful transfer of power, the insistence of the ruling regime at that time to stay in power, and the timid democratic culture within society (Ould Al-Salik 2014, 105).

On both the social and cultural levels, Mauritanian society continues to suffer from cultural, ethnic, spatial, and tribal fragmentation due to lack of harmony between the collective will, educated elites, and political leadership. This is mainly because the national state enforced colonial policies. At the economic level, the national elites’ mismanagement of the economic surplus, in addition to the repercussions of the structural adjustment programs on the political and social conditions, led to the dependence of the Mauritanian national state on foreign countries. This is known in political and international studies as the “concept of conditional democracy.” In a simplified way, since the 1990s, Western countries have linked the volume of assistance to developing countries with the latter’s commitment to enforce liberal values, especially concepts related to democratization and human rights.

In conclusion, it is only possible to resolve the aforementioned crises that continue to hinder the process of establishing a functioning civil society through mutual consensus and national dialogue among all social forces. Only by adhering to common civil values and overcoming the nihilism, and the exploitation of political power may we close the gap between social differences to achieve immediate positive political objectives in the Mauritanian political scene.

Mohamed El-Amine Ould Mohamed Ibrahim (PhD) is a specialist in legal and political sciences, Mohammed V University, Rabat, Morocco. Email: medleminmed9@gmail.com

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