

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN MAURITANIA: OUTCOME OF THE 2015 U.N. HUMAN RIGHTS REVIEW

Violations of Free Expression Rights (2010–2015)

In its [stakeholder submission](#) to the U.N. Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Mauritania, the MFWA reported 29 incidents of violations of the right to freedom of expression (FoE) and the right to freedom of assembly and association from November 2010 through March 2015. The police or security forces perpetrated 23 of these incidents using unnecessary force and firearms, including teargas, to disperse peaceful demonstrations in violation of international principles.

MFWA's Submitted Information Included in the 2015 UPR

The MFWA was one of 19 civil society groups that submitted information to the UPR to improve Mauritania's human rights record. The Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) cited MFWA's stakeholder submission nine times. OHCHR referenced the MFWA's information and recommendations regarding:

- Mauritania parliament's adoption of a new media, liberalising the airwaves and insulating state-owned media from governmental control;¹
- Detention and death sentence of Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed for apostasy;²
- Denial of NGO requests to register with the government;³
- Police and security forces' violent dispersions of anti-slavery demonstrations, arrests and detentions of protesters, and also attacks against and arrests of journalists covering slavery issues;⁴
- Self-censorship of journalists in their coverage of issues concerning the government, military, slavery, and Sharia law;⁵
- Development and implementation of national guidelines for police and security forces prohibiting violence against individuals exercising their right to freedom of expression;⁶
- Enforcement of the prohibition against torture, including the need to investigate and prosecute perpetrators.⁷

Accepted State Recommendations on FoE Rights and Issues

On the issue of the excessive use of force by police and security forces, Mauritania agreed to:

- Ensure that allegations of excessive use of force by police and security forces are investigated, prosecuted, and convicted in line with international standards.⁸

On the issue of raising awareness about human rights, Mauritania agreed to:

- Disseminate awareness of human rights;⁹
- Strengthen the culture of human rights in society;¹⁰

Mauritania at the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR)

At-A-Glance...

Date of review: 3 November 2015

Last review: 10 November 2010

Next review: April 2020

Troika: Bangladesh, Congo, France

Accepted FoE Recommendations:
Mauritania accepted recommendations by U.N. Member States on holding police and security forces accountable for excessive use of force; raising awareness about human rights; and anti-slavery campaigns.

Rejected FoE Recommendations:
Very disturbingly, however, Mauritania rejected explicit recommendations by U.N. Member States on protecting the right to freedom of expression and creating an enabling environment, especially of journalists and human rights defenders.

MFWA's Recommendations for Advocacy Interventions

1. Ensure that human rights defenders, particularly journalists and anti-slavery activists, in Mauritania are trained in security and risk assessments to enable them to conduct their work as safely as possible.
2. Engage major donor countries in urging the government of Mauritania to fulfill its existing obligations to respect and protect the right to freedom of expression under the Constitution of Mauritania and international law.
3. Engage major donor countries in urging the government of Mauritania to reform its blasphemy and anti-apostasy legislation.
4. Encourage U.N. Member States, particularly in the West Africa region, to suggest recommendations on FoE rights and issues in the lead up to Mauritania's next UPR in April 2020.

- Conduct human rights awareness-raising activities for public servants, in particular law enforcement officers;¹¹
- Further improve human rights in the country;¹²
- Enhance the respect for human rights anchored on the rule of law and good governance.¹³

On the issue of anti-slavery activism and campaigns, which implicate both the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, Mauritania agreed to:

- Increase awareness-raising campaigns on the prohibition of slavery;¹⁴
- Expand public awareness campaigns against slavery to effectively cover all forms of slavery.¹⁵

Rejected State Recommendations on FoE

On the issue of decriminalising apostasy offenses, which violate the right to freedom of expression as well as the right to freedom of religion, Mauritania refused to:

- Remove the crime of apostasy from its legislation;¹⁶
- Revise blasphemy and anti-apostasy legislation to ensure their conformity with international obligations.¹⁷

On the protection of journalists and human rights defenders, especially anti-slavery activists, Mauritania refused to:

- Provide space for civil society organisations in line with international standards and best-practices;¹⁸
- Release from prison human rights defenders who called for the full abolition of slavery;¹⁹
- Protect effectively freedom of expression of civil society, in particular for journalists and human rights defenders, so that they can carry out their activities freely without hindrance, intimidation, harassment, or risk of condemnation;²⁰
- Prevent the arbitrary arrest and detention of human rights defenders;²¹
- Create and maintain a safe and enabling environment, in which human rights defenders can operate free from hindrance and insecurity.²²

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- ¹ [Summary Prepared by the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), Human Rights Council, 23rd Sess., ¶ 107, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/WG.6/23/MRT/3 (17 Aug. 2015) [hereinafter *Summary of Stakeholders' Information*].
 - ² *Summary of Stakeholders' Information* ¶ 55–56.
 - ³ *Summary of Stakeholders' Information* ¶ 195.
 - ⁴ *Summary of Stakeholders' Information* ¶¶ 97, 101.
 - ⁵ *Summary of Stakeholders' Information* ¶ 103.
 - ⁶ *Summary of Stakeholders' Information* ¶ 102.
 - ⁷ *Summary of Stakeholders' Information* ¶ 62.
 - ⁸ [Draft Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of Mauritania](#), Human Rights Council, 23rd Sess., ¶ 5.35 (by Sweden), U.N. Doc. A/HRC/WG.6/23/L.3 (5 Nov. 2015) [hereinafter *Draft Report of UPR Working Group*].
 - ⁹ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 5.19 (by Morocco).
 - ¹⁰ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 5.20 (by Uzbekistan).
 - ¹¹ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 5.24 (by Vietnam).
 - ¹² *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 6.2 (by Azerbaijan).
 - ¹³ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 6.6 (by Ghana).
 - ¹⁴ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 6.37 (by Qatar).
 - ¹⁵ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶¶ 6.46 (by Iran), 6.47 (by Uganda).
 - ¹⁶ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶¶ 8.27 (by Poland), 8.28 (by Belgium).
 - ¹⁷ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 8.29 (by Canada).
 - ¹⁸ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 8.50 (by Germany).
 - ¹⁹ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 8.50 (by Germany).
 - ²⁰ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 8.52 (by Belgium).
 - ²¹ *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 8.58 (by Ireland).
 - ²² *Draft Report of UPR Working Group* ¶ 8.58 (by Ireland).