



“Land Slavery” and Stolen Land Another Tool for Oppression of Black Mauritians

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Mauritania's continued practice of hereditary slavery often defines it in the international human rights conversation. But the government's unabashed land-grabbing, which includes cutting off access to water resources, are additional tools used to oppress, destabilize, and literally destroy Black Mauritanian communities.

“Our life is the sea—we have nothing else.”

In the N'Diogo area, fishing and agriculture are the primary means of survival for 10,000 Black Mauritians. Yet the Mauritanian government is turning land and sea access over to international corporations with a history of corruption, and taking Afro Mauritians land and giving it to Haratines performing the politics of divide and conquer.¹

Most local residents are afraid to speak up. This makes the role of Iba Sarr, president of the southern branch of the Free Federation of Artisanal Fishing (*la Federation Libre de la Peche Artisanal*), all the more critical to protecting N'Diogo residents' literal existence:

The state is creating a town [by the newly-constructed port], and it's going to change the area, bring in others, and limit our access to resources—and we have no information about it. We have been here a long time, but we will get nothing. They will take our land and our resources, and we should have been told that they are doing this. They are not protecting us....

We used to have an abundance of fish, and today we have fewer fish—the conditions have become so much scarcer. Russian fishing boats and Chinese and Turkish ships have also been pillaging the seas. Every day we try to defend our community. The problem is that we have powerful businessmen who are looking to exploit us and they tell the world that Mauritania does not have a fishing tradition, but we do. . . . We want to practice responsible fishing; our life depends on it. Our life is the sea—we have nothing else.”²

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<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/08/06/mauritania-s-economic-and-social-ambitions-collide-story-of-diawling-park-pub-82424>

² Ibid

Land Grabbing and Land Slavery: Government-Led Destruction of Black Communities

The Global Slavery Index estimates that 90,000 Mauritians remain enslaved, despite laws outlawing and criminalizing the practice.³ As another historic tool of oppression, Black Mauritians have been and continue to be stripped of their land ownership rights. In the 1980s, a new law provided a legal basis for the government to confiscate land owned by Fulani and other Black citizens, redistributing it to Beydanes (lighter-skinned Arab Mauritians) and Arab-speaking Haratines, who served as their slaves.⁴

Land-grabbing and confiscation of livestock by Arab forces was an integral part of the overall assault on Black Mauritians during the ethnic cleansing campaign of the late 1980s and 1990s. At this time, 70,000 Black Mauritians were “accused” of being Senegalese and deported from Mauritania, while thousands were arrested without charge. An unknown number were tortured and killed.⁵

As yet another way to marginalize and destroy Black Mauritanian families, the government attempted to nationalize the land and destroy the centuries-old tribal system of land rights through a law passed in 1983.

Historian Abderrahman Ngaide explained how this worked. “Most black people didn’t own papers to show they owned the land. The system of land tenure was an old system that pre-dated colonialism. Black people realised that this reform was taking the land from them. It looked like a form of colonisation. It’s racism and economic interests together.”⁶

Permission to steal land based on one’s ethnic background, a system built on structural racism, continues today and creates what is called in French, “l’esclavage foncier,” or “land slavery.”⁷ Land slavery is the pattern of the government taking land away from Black Mauritians and giving it to Beydanes. The Beydanes then employ or enslave the Black Mauritians to work the land they previously owned.⁸

Like the anti-slavery laws in Mauritania that are rarely enforced, a policy to compensate those whose land was stolen by the government exists on paper. But very little land has actually been redistributed, and the Mauritanian government has not included Black Mauritians in the conversation about land development and compensation.⁹

Who Profits from Mauritania’s Wealth on Land and Sea?

The current conflict of land grabbing often occurs between Fulani refugees who were deported to Senegal in the 1990s and then brought back to Mauritania in 2011, and Beydane (Arab) Mauritians and Beydane authorities at all levels of government (including former

³ <https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/data/country-data/mauritania/>

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/02/12/ethnicity-discrimination-and-other-red-lines/repression-human-rights-defenders>

⁵ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/200000/afr380131989en.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/node/150446>

⁷ <https://lnkd.in/et2ZvNt>

⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/02/12/ethnicity-discrimination-and-other-red-lines/repression-human-rights-defender>

⁹ <https://mr.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/204/Mauritania-2018-Human-Rights-Report.pdf>

slaves called Haratines). From 2011 to this day, multiple Black Mauritanian villages, populated mostly by Fulanis in the southern part of Mauritania, have been victims of land grabbing by the government, including the villages of Boghe, Darel Barka, and now MBagne/Feralla.

In fact, Mauritanian human rights activists and local human rights organizations report that state authorities to this day are allowing Beydanes or Haratines to take over land that is owned by Black Mauritians (people of Fulani, Soninke, or Wolof ethnicity), and even block their access to water.

Mauritania is rich in minerals and natural resources, but the wealth that exists within the land is frequently taken from the Black property owners and turned over to international corporations, to the benefit of the Mauritanian government.¹⁰

In 2020 the Mauritanian government gave thousands of hectares of land along the Senegalese River region to Arab investors. In August of that year some 9,200 people who inhabited the Brakna region of Dar el Barka in southern Mauritania demonstrated for several days after the state gave their grain-growing land to an Arab investor from the Gulf.¹¹ During a demonstration their spokesperson, Abdourahmane Ly, reaffirmed the people's attachment to their land: "These 3200 hectares of land belong to us. There is no question of someone coming from elsewhere to do what they want with it, without our consent. People must be consulted and asked for their opinion. We are in a country of law."

Black Mauritians Raise their Voices

The National Forum of Human Rights Organizations (FONADH) and its president, Mamadou Sarr, also criticized the implementation of land grabbing laws and their impact on Black Mauritians.¹²

In early 2021, a new wave of land grabbing in the southern part of Mauritania continues, especially in the villages of Mbagne and Ferallah. Black Mauritanian residents organized a peaceful protest on February 22 to raise awareness about their stolen land.

The goal of the protest was to tell the world that their land is being ripped away by the Mauritanian government. The human consequences of this practice are devastating, with Black Mauritians losing access to agriculture, their sole livelihoods, as well as the land of their ancestors.

After these demonstrations against the World Sahel Irrigation Initiative and its harm to the village of Ferallah,¹³ the World Bank expressed "concerns about the land issues raised by the protestors," pledged to investigate, and reaffirmed that "protecting the rights of the

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<https://eiti.org/mauritania#:~:text=Mauritania%20has%20rich%20deposits%20of,is%20found%20primarily%20at%20Akjoujt>

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https://www.tellerreport.com/news/2020-08-23-thousands-of-mauritanian-peasants-take-action-against-land-grabbing.BJo_J9lkQv.html

¹²

<https://afrique.le360.ma/mauritanie/societe/2021/03/03/33716-mauritanie-une-nouvelle-affaire-daccaparement-des-terres-dans-la-vallee-du-fleuve-senegal>

¹³

<https://afrique.le360.ma/mauritanie/politique/2021/03/22/33916-video-mauritanie-accaparement-des-terres-agricoles-de-feralla-populations-et-ong-denoncent>

communities and the environment are central to all activities related to its investment projects.”¹⁴

The Human Consequences of Stolen Land

Land grabbing has a ripple effect on Black Mauritanian families. It displaces them from their homes and often their country, forcing them to start over with nothing. A “successful” land grab from the perspective of the Arab Beydanes would send entire populations and villages of Black Mauritians into homelessness, poverty, and starvation. This adds to migration pressure as well as civil unrest. Black Mauritians, who have been denied basic human rights since before Independence, have attempted to exert their civil and human rights against the Arab ruling class, with little support or enforcement of accountability from the International Community.

During a recent protest in Feralla Cherif Ba, a native of Mbagne, shared: “This rush for our lands is an ongoing process and part of the government's agenda to ‘Arabize’ the country, and further violate human rights for Black Mauritians.”

That is why, as human rights organization and activists, the Mauritanian Network for Human Rights in US is calling on the International Community, including the United States and United Nations, to:

- Demand that the Mauritanian government immediately cease the practice of land grabbing/land slavery.
- Ensure that the Mauritanian government passes and *enforces* new laws to protect property rights and outlaw the practice of land grabbing/land slavery.
- Broker mediation and peaceful conflict resolution, with adequate compensation for victims of land grabbing/land slavery.
- Offer protection and compensation to Black Mauritians who have been forced out of the country due to this practice.
- Ensure the Mauritanian government involves landowners in the process of land development and cultivation, and contract negotiations with foreign nationals.
- Require the Mauritanian government to protect and respect land rights and human rights.

*To learn more about human rights abuses in Mauritania today, read this backgrounder from the U.S. Committee for Refugee and Immigrants.*¹⁵

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www.mauritianiannetwork.org

[@MauritanianFor](https://twitter.com/MauritanianFor)

¹⁴

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/statement/2021/02/26/precisions-de-la-banque-mondiale-sur-le-projet-dirrigation-sahel-dans-le-village-de-ferallah>

¹⁵ <https://lnkd.in/et2ZvNt>