

Claiming for Justice and Repairs in Mauritania: Judging or Forgiving ?

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In 2005, the Mauritanian President Ould Sid' Ahmed Taya, in power since 1984, was overthrown by a military coup, opening a new era of democratic transition. This political transition was characterized by the official recognition, for the first time in 20 years, of the massive human rights violations perpetuated against Black Mauritians in 1989-1999, which had led to the expulsion of 120 000 of them and the execution of more than 500. As the official repatriation of Mauritanian refugees was launched in 2008 and several “national days of consultation” organized, intense debates over national reconciliation appeared for the first time on the Mauritanian public scene. This issue was also to a large extent instrumentalised to legitimize a new military coup in 2008 and was a major theme of debates during the subsequent presidential elections organized in 2009. While repatriation of Black Mauritians is on-going today, many returnees have started to move back to Senegal as they considered having been betrayed by the Mauritanian government. In addition to the lack of access to basic infrastructures, the lack of restitution of property and citizenship rights as well as the lack of a genuine justice have been repeatedly evoked. Others, however, have decided to stay in Mauritania to continue fighting for moral and material repair from “within”.

Based on an on-going research, this paper will explore how models of justice and repair have been, and are still being, constructed, negotiated and contested in Mauritania by the elite in power, the associations of victims (based in Mauritania, but also Senegal, Europe and the United States) and the ordinary people. The author will look at how these sometimes opposing models are being shaped by multiple meanings, which are embedded in transnational ideas over justice, local conceptions of “dignity ” and “shame”, and religious (islamic) notions of “forgiveness”. She will also analyze the performative effects of these debates over justice and repair, among which the reactivation of discourses over autochthony, the proliferation of various categories of “victims” on the Mauritanian public scene, and the increasing mistrust between the elites representing the victims and the rest of the population. Beyond the official claims over justice, the author will eventually reflect on the daily and individual strategies mobilized by ordinary Mauritanian returnees to obtain the recognition of their citizenship, have their land back or obtain financial compensation.