

COMMENTARY

Authoritarian Africa beyond Guantánamo: Freedom in Captivity

Erin Pettigrew 

Keywords: Mauritania; Sahara; Guantánamo; Islam; politics

(Received 1 December 2019 – Revised 28 January 2020 – Accepted 28 January 2020)

Africanists struggle with Mohamedou Ould Slahi's story for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that the Saharan region is often considered a space betwixt and between. Not only does the Sahara lie between the Maghreb and the Sahel, but Slahi's experience illustrates how the military and political histories of counterterrorism and the intellectual and social histories of Islamist calls for religious reform are imagined as occurring elsewhere. The upswing in violence in Burkina Faso and Mali, the continued disruptions of Boko Haram, and the deep military involvement and investments in the Sahara remind us that the African continent has been an important site in the global war on terror (Thurston 2017). American and European foreign assistance, often in the form of military aid, has helped expand the surveillance capacities of African states, especially after 2001. In the case of Mauritania, American counterterrorism funds contributed to the consolidation of power in the authoritarian regime of Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, who ruled from 1984 to 2005, while the Mauritanian government ignored demands for democratization from its own citizens and instead pursued repressive policies that accused political opponents of Islamist activity, limiting their freedom of expression (Jourde 2007). Slahi's story, then, can be seen as part of a much longer history of foreign incursion

African Studies Review, Volume 63, Number 2 (June 2020), pp. 411–416

Erin Pettigrew is Assistant Professor of History and Arab Crossroads Studies at New York University Abu Dhabi. E-mail: erin.pettigrew@nyu.edu

© African Studies Association, 2020

doi:[10.1017/asr.2020.13](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.13)

and neocolonial intrusion into African affairs, as the war on terror has led to a similar bolstering of authoritarian governments, an influx of military aid and funds that encourage corruption, and worrisome increases in weapons at the expense of other needed projects and investment, as happened during the Cold War (Schmidt 2013). Rather than promote economic development and democracy, these policies undermine Africa's future.

As Slahi has himself articulated when asked about what led him from Mauritania to Afghanistan in the early 1990s, neo-authoritarian regimes propped up by Western governments provide more than adequate motivation for young, intellectually curious and politically engaged Africans to look for alternative solutions to their countries' problems. In Mauritania especially, where the local production of religious knowledge has played a crucial role in the history of Islam and the formation of Muslim identities in the larger region, these activists rely on pre-existing and new configurations of religious texts, scholars, and theories to express dissent and mobilize action (Ould Ahmed Salem 2013). If the desire is to better understand Slahi's unfortunate trajectory in the larger context of the War on Terror, the history of local religious discourse and political action matters as much as the global circulation of Islamist videos, mercenaries, and weapons as well as the detrimental effects of Western intervention abroad and extreme socioeconomic inequality.

In the lead-up to the 2019 presidential elections in Mauritania, Slahi wrote and published an open letter online, translated from Arabic into French and English, to the incoming president.¹ Slahi lamented the absence of freedoms of expression in his country and encouraged the new president to dissolve the current parliament, reform the educational system, and make a commitment to transparency and democratic governance. Ostensibly, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania experienced its first democratic transition of power when on June 22, 2019, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani declared victory, claiming 52 percent of the vote. The four main opposition candidates expressed dissatisfaction that the timing of this declaration took place before the official electoral commission (the CENI) announced a winner, and protests in several neighborhoods of larger cities reflected similar discontent, especially among young and opposition voters, though most Mauritians were little surprised that Ghazouani would replace outgoing president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz.²

Foreign media outlets celebrated these elections as a sign of democratic maturity, wherein a military general who took over in a highly undemocratic *coup d'état* in 2008 had agreed to respect the country's constitution and to step down after two terms as president.³ Locally, Ghazouani was understood to be the president's guaranteed successor, a kind of Dmitri Medvedev figure to Mauritania's Vladimir Putin-esque Aziz. Many assumed that Aziz would continue ruling from behind, and his public statements that the constitution did not prohibit him from ruling again after this term had passed legitimated such concerns (Zidi 2019). Internet blackouts and arrests of opposition figures in the days following the election only underscored the undemocratic consequences of this supposedly democratic moment in the country's history.

Because both Aziz and Ghazouani had been involved in the 2005 coup d'état overthrowing Taya, as well as the 2008 coup d'état toppling Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi (who served for eighteen months), many local watchdogs expressed fears that Aziz sought to remain in power by any means. Having benefitted enormously from foreign military and economic support, opposition activists could not imagine that Aziz would want to relinquish power, and they warned that he would amend the constitution to end term limits or to permit a third term (Antil & Lesourd 2010). Aziz came into power claiming to be the *ra'īs al-fuqarā'* (the president of the poor), promising an improvement in living conditions for the country's poorest citizens, with initial investments in infrastructure projects such as the completion of new roads connecting cities along the Senegal River and in the center of the country, but daily life had hardly improved for the majority of the country's population by the end of his two terms. Tourism was far from returning to its robust activity before the 2007 killing of a French family and subsequent al-Qaeda affiliate attacks on security posts while, in the meantime, events in neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso had only strengthened Aziz's resolve to build up the country's military and border enforcement capabilities, something he and his fellow putschists argued Cheikh Abdallahi was unable or unwilling to do.

While no jihadist violence has occurred in Mauritania since February of 2011, due to an alleged secret agreement between the Mauritanian state and al-Qaeda which allowed the latter to use Mauritania as a base of operations in exchange for a promise not to attack on Mauritanian soil, the country still suffers the consequences of jihadist violence elsewhere. Malians seek refuge in camps set up along the borders, tourists avoid the region altogether, and the state invests heavily in border patrols, Islamist surveillance, and strategic wealth distribution targeting jihadist sympathizers. Meanwhile, state-supported institutions, such as schools and hospitals, busy roads leading south to the border with Senegal, and guarantees of freedom of speech crumble. The country's marginalized regions of the East, especially among the "black" *hrāṭīn* and the Soninké, Wolof, and Pulaar-speaking populations of the region of the Senegal River Valley, voice frustration at what they see as purposeful neglect and discrimination by the regime.⁴ Prominent figures such as the anti-slavery activist Biram Dah Abeid and opposition politicians Ibrahim Moktar Saar and Samba Thiam mobilize their supporters across ethnolinguistic lines. Along with the dominant Islamist political party, Tawassoul, opposition strains constitute a political threat to the regime and underline the fractured nature of the Mauritanian political, cultural, and religious identity.

Slahi returned to Mauritania and into these currents of socio-political tension after his release from Guantánamo in October of 2016. As with many former Guantánamo prisoners, Slahi came back without the most basic rights of a citizen, namely the freedom to vote, to travel, and to take care of his own body and health.⁵ Denied a passport, Slahi found he could not procure other basic documents such as a birth certificate because his identity had been blocked administratively. Without these state-issued documents, he was unable to vote, work in an official capacity, or seek advanced medical

treatment abroad for the chronic pain stemming from a nerve condition associated with the abuse he suffered during his detention. He was also unable to visit his American wife and newborn son who live in Germany. As the news outlet *Aljazeera* described, Slahi was the “first Mauritanian *bidūn*,” a term in Arabic used to describe a legal status usually reserved for Palestinians or certain residents of Gulf countries who have been denied the rights of citizenship.⁶ Slahi claimed the Mauritanian government initially informed him that he would be granted a passport after two years per an agreement with the American government dictating the terms of his release. However, his applications for these precious state-issued documents were rejected with the explanation that the United States still demanded that the Mauritanian government enforce these restrictions. Slahi petitioned the new minister of the interior to grant him a passport, a request signed by human rights activists in and outside of Mauritania and publicized in the local and international press.⁷

Slahi categorized his post-incarceration status as one of “vulnerable freedom,” having been released from one of the world’s most notorious prisons to return to domestic imprisonment.⁸ Unable to be with his wife when she gave birth, to promote his book, to attend human rights sessions on torture and abuse in person, or most crucially to attend to his own health, Slahi relied heavily on social media and telecommunications to maintain relationships, participate in conferences, and to advocate for a change in his political status. Even as Slahi, Ann McDougall, Abbass Braham, and I prepared our talking points over Skype for the roundtable at the 2018 African Studies Association annual meeting that inspired the pieces in this issue of *ASR* and discussed when we would be flying into Atlanta, Slahi chided us for taking our freedom of movement for granted. “How I would like to be with you guys,” he told us. He has tried to piece together a living, unsure when the full rights of citizenship might be restored and by whom. He focused on writing—currently a novel, *Ahmed and Zarga*, set in Mauritania and focusing on nomadic life, a book on happiness—and he completed an online course to become a certified life coach. Photographs on his *Twitter* feed sometimes showed him visiting the newly renovated “Freedom Square” in the capital, a not-so-subtle allusion to his own status as a “slave” of the Mauritanian state and to the politics of American counter-terrorism post 9/11.⁹

Slahi has adopted an increasingly public role as an advocate for democratic reform in Mauritania. His open letter to Ghazouani on the eve of the presidential elections and another published three weeks later protesting censorship show a desire to draw international attention to troubling political events.¹⁰ And, while he remains critical of the United States government’s pattern of violating the human rights of the men it arrested and detained without trial in the post-9/11 “War on Terror,” Slahi reserves some of his harshest criticism for the Mauritanian state that capitulated to American pressure and allowed for the surveillance and extraordinary rendition of its own citizens.

Slahi dreams of a state and a government that asserts sovereignty in the face of Western pressure, that enacts policies to limit corruption, that focuses

on capacity-building through education and job creation, and that upholds its constitution and ensures a democratic process for political leadership. To the new president he wrote of his desire to see his fellow Mauritians with “their heads high, with no fear but of Allah.”¹¹ In a surprise move, in November 2019, the Mauritanian government granted Slahi a passport. Days later, news also broke that filmmaker Kevin Macdonald (*Last King of Scotland, State of Play, Whitney*) would be directing a biographical film about Slahi starring the French actor Tahar Rahim as Slahi. *Prisoner 760*, based on *Guantánamo Diary*, focuses on the conditions in which Slahi was kidnapped and detained by the United States (Slahi 2015).¹² To be filmed primarily in South Africa and Mauritania, the film will hopefully attract the attention of a larger audience to Slahi’s extralegal arrest and unjust imprisonment.

At the time of this writing, Slahi had been granted a visa to South Africa, where he traveled in January 2020 to visit the set of the film. He made a stop at Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for eighteen years, and expressed that he felt humbled and emotional by the visit, drawing parallels between his own and Mandela’s long incarceration. Slahi hoped to be able to apply successfully for a visa permitting him to travel to see his wife and child in Germany and to seek medical care despite his record as a prisoner at Guantánamo. The political scene in Mauritania also shifted rather unpredictably, with open tensions between the former and new president over who would control the ruling party. In the winter of 2020, the government arrested fourteen progressive activists for having expressed support for secular governance in the country and imprisoned eight men accused of the “immoral act” of homosexuality. It remains to be seen whether attention drawn to Mauritania and its politics through the production and release of the film *Prisoner 760* will make a difference in the lives of Slahi or his compatriots.

References

- Antil, Alain and Céline Lesourd. 2010. “Non, mon président! Oui, mon général! Retour sur l’expérience et la chute du président Sidi ould Cheikh Abdallahi.” *L’Année du Maghreb* 5.
- Jourde, Cédric. 2007. “Constructing Representations of the ‘Global War on Terror’ in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25 (1): 77–100.
- Ould Ahmed Salem, Zekeria. 2013. *Prêcher dans le désert: Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie*. Paris: Karthala.
- Ould Slahi, Mohamedou. 2015. *Guantanamo Diary*. New York: Little Brown.
- Schmidt, Elizabeth. 2013. *Foreign Intervention in Africa: From the Cold War to the War on Terror*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thurston, Alexander. 2017. *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Zidi, Paulina. 2019. “Mauritanie: Le président Aziz n’exclut pas une future candidature présidentielle.” *RFI Afrique*. www.rfi.fr/afrique/.

Notes

1. Mohamedou Ould Slahi, "Risāla muftūḥ ilā al-sa'īd al-ra'īs al-muntakheb," *Echourouq Media*, accessed June 19, 2019, www.echourouqmedia.net.
2. The internet was cut the day after the election as protests took place. See "Mauritania: l'internet mobile coupé au lendemain de la présidentielle," *RFI Afrique*, accessed June 25, 2019, www.rfi.fr/afrique/.
3. For example, see "Mauritania set for first democratic transition of power," *BBC News*, accessed June 22, 2019, www.bbc.com.
4. Understood locally to be Hassaniya-speakers of enslaved origin.
5. Several former detainees were transferred to a third country instead of to their country of origin. Ghana, Uganda, and Cape Verde accepted former Guantánamo prisoners in secret deals with the United States government despite local protest. See "Ghana agrees to take two Gitmo detainees that Obama wanted to release," *Public Radio International*, January 7, 2016, www.pri.org.
6. "Moḥamedū ūld ślāhī: awel morītānī bidūn," *Aljazeera*, July 7, 2017, www.aljazeera.net. "You're between sky and Earth': The plight of biduns in Kuwait," *The Guardian*, October 17, 2011, www.theguardian.com.
7. "Ūld ślāhī yaṭālib wazīr al-dākhilīa b-ilifrāj 'an jawāz safarhi," *Rim Feed*, September 2, 2019, www.rimfeed.com and his *Twitter* account, September 2, 2019, <https://twitter.com/MohamedouOuld/status/1168476642630668289>.
8. *Twitter*, August 12, 2019, <https://twitter.com/MohamedouOuld/status/1162454190209347584>.
9. For the parallels he draws to enslavement, see "'I'm being punished': Guantanamo's 'most tortured detainee' still can't leave Mauritania," *Middle East Eye*, August 22, 2019, www.middleeasteye.net.
10. Mohamedou Ould Slahi, "Guantanamo Diary Author Protests Internet Shutdown in Mauritania," *Warscapes*, July 12, 2019, www.warscapes.com and he has given interviews to local television stations in the intervening years since his return to Mauritania. See *YouTube*, www.youtube.com.
11. Ould Slahi, "Risāla muftūḥ".
12. Leo Barraclough, "Jodie Foster, Shailene Woodley, Tahar Rahim Join Benedict Cumberbatch in 'Prisoner 760'," *Variety*, Online, November 1, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/film/global/jodie-foster-tahar-rahim-shailene-woodley-benedict-cumberbatch-prisoner-760-1203390228/?fbclid=IwAR2rXE0d4rVB-0w6Mf6nyTvwNO7-DWIm7b2uFXj1pVa7VfYDNYRIP7gIk>.