

5th Forum on Minority Issues

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Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement in Mauritania

Your Excellency Madam President,

Your Excellencies Ms and Mr Ambassadors,

Ms and Mr the representatives of NGOs,

I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me the opportunity to speak here in front of you, at the Palais des Nations, three months after my release from the jails of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, and two weeks after the presentation by the Mauritanian government of its periodic report on human rights in front of the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Indeed, the reason for the Mauritanian government to put me in jail together with several of my friends from last 28 April, and the arguments used by the official delegation of my country before the UN Commissioners are intimately related.

The pretext put forward by the scholars, imams, political parties, magistrates and those in power – in short, the bulk of the leadership and establishment in Mauritania – who are all from the dominant Arabo-Berber minority, consisted in excluding me from my community, or even from my social existence, in order to punish me for having symbolically burned copies of pieces written by legal advisers of slave-trading societies in the 9-15th centuries AC. These exegesis texts pretended to interpret the Quran and the gesture of the Prophet of Islam and led to producing the black code, whose essence is racist, fundamentally anti-humanist, and which has been a vehicle for stigmatisation and violation of universal principles of equality by birth and by law as well as violation of the spirit and essence of equality and justice in the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet. This ignominious corpus is still being taught in the schools of my country, legitimises over the dead bodies of the Black victims castration, trade of human beings, and rape, and recommends forced labour. The doctrine that follows is being sacralised and defended by the sentinels of this Orthodoxy, it tends to become sacred, and sets itself up a indisputable truth. Everything outside this truth is considered blasphemy, heresy, apostasy.

Such doctrine splits Muslims into two categories, masters and slaves. Similarly, this archaic vision of the world forbids women to have leadership positions in the society, including preaching the law. According to those who promote such a vision of life, women are weak by nature, do not make rigorous judgements, are incapable of settling disputes equitably, and are congenitally exposed to satanic temptations. Thus, women are deemed to stay “underaged for life”, because

of their sex. In parallel, but coming from the same source, slaves are merely an object, a movable asset, because of their consubstantial inferiority – some would even say intrinsic.

As a matter of consequence, the Mauritanian political and religious class – most of whom are descendants of slave traders – very swiftly labelled me apostate and condemned me, alleging that I attacked the religious feelings of Mauritians, that I harmed the State safety and that I dared to belong or even to lead an illegal organisation. Most of the political leaders of my country advocated for death penalty, in application to the Sharia.

Our symbolic burning of these books comes from a subversive tradition and counter-culture that is well rooted in the history of the arabic-muslim world, to which Mauritania claims to belong. It also conforms to the Convention of the United Nations on the rights of expression, to which Mauritania is part. Our aim with such an act was to call out to the international community in general and the Muslim world in particular on two important facts: for Mauritania to deserve being qualified as a state with a rule of law, it should finally comply with the international law, to which it often hastens, with fuss and dishonesty.

This country should also deserve being qualified as “Islamic” and conform to the rule of the Holy book, the Quran, with regards to equity, equality, justice, brotherhood between all human beings, as well as to the teachings of the Prophet Mohamed regarding the duty to support and help the poor and the oppressed, the love of one’s neighbour, the moving away from lie and falsehood, etc.

Alas, dear fellow delegates, after our act of protest, the aforementioned leaders of our society and State called for, and incited our murder. This shows that the slogan of democracy and rule of law and the ploy of the ratifications of various conventions are but window-dressing to show a nice face to the international community without ever submitting to the people’s rights. This is permanent deception whose continuity is fed by double speech: in foreign language and in front of foreigners, the Mauritanian authorities use a civilised language in irreproachable conformity with human dignity and freedom; in Arabic language and among themselves, it leans on its racist and cast-based certainties and hides its infamy under the shield of religion!!!

Ladies and Gentlemen, the performance of the Mauritanian governmental delegation and diplomatic mission before the UN Council of Human Rights during the UPR on 15-16 November 2012 backs up our previous observations, up to a point that it seems a caricature. Indeed, during their pathetic exercise, beyond the faults which the Mauritanian officials are used to inflict to us as democrats and human rights defenders, they added an immense fault on Islam and the Muslims from all over the world. They made Islam be responsible for the persistence of all injustices faced by fringes of the Mauritanian society who belong to the majority population yet are destitute – people with HIV/AIDS, women, slaves, former slaves or Hratins, non-Arabophone Black ethnic minorities, weakest links among Arabophones, etc. The peak was reached when the representatives of Mauritania took refuge behind the “incompatibility of the enforcement of economic, social and cultural rights with the rules of Islam, religion of the State and the people”.

This is a serious declaration, with an unprecedented violence, and the international community should react to it vigorously and without delay.

As far as the content is concerned, this declaration is also untrue for Islam is a religion of justice, equality and peace according to all Muslim democrats, even if in some Muslim societies minorities engage in injustices and instrumentalise religion to this hidden end. Yet Mauritanian delegates in Switzerland maintain that "if equality between men and women cannot be realised, it is because God wanted so". Here there is an obvious contradiction in the rights policy of my country. Why isn't Mauritania like other Muslim countries which respect the laws and conventions they ratify, without denying their religious identity? Why does the Mauritanian government adhere to international texts which are superior to laws (including constitutional laws) and commits to implement them, while its diplomats reject such references because of incompatibility with Islam? Don't the members of the government who ratify believe in the same Islam as these diplomats?

To an other question of the UN commissioners regarding Mauritania's programmes against HIV/AIDS, the Mauritanian delegation replied: "The Mauritanian State does not have any programme against HIV/AIDS besides abstinence as prescribed by the Holy Quran"!!!

However, the funds that were given to us by UNAIDS for the fight against HIV/AIDS have been squandered by high level public officials and so-called legal advisers in the framework of advocacy and awareness-raising programs which are often botched, if not even nonexistent. The most famous inter-tribal corruption scandal remains unpunished. Because of our diplomats we are back to adventurism in the public health sector, as they pretend to fight such a serious illness with ideological arguments.

Regarding slave-trading, there are only a few Mauritanian high level officials coming from the slavish community, the Hratins, which makes up unfortunately the majority of the population. These descendants of slaves, like myself and like the Ambassador of Mauritania to Geneva, are from time to time nominated to positions that are in fact the reward for assuming a false testimony without too much scruple. That is why the rare Hratins who have been coopted for this task are assigned to the denial of their community's suffering and try, in vain, to stifle the voice of the victims by ascendance of slavery practices which 20% of Mauritaniens directly and the majority of the population incidentally suffer from. This way, the human rights minister and the diplomatic mission of Mauritania worked on denying traditional slavery practices while supporting the current modern slavery in Mauritania!!! Modern slavery is no less a criminal and degrading than traditional slavery.

Moreover, the diplomatic mission of Mauritania to Geneva houses a person who is a slave or descendant of a slave; this person is under the yoke of an official of the Embassy, a woman who would be her master or former master. Hence, following the example of the Embassy of Mauritania in Paris, whose accountant was able to exfiltrate to Mauritania a girl he held as a slave in the last moment, similar presumptions have been made regarding the representation of Mauritania on the territory of Switzerland.

Dear friends, this incident before the UN Council of Human Rights, without any intervention from our side, spontaneously revealed the true face of the ethno-tribal domination system in

Mauritania. This system is more and more tempted to instrumentalise religious extremism with the aim to further postpone the unavoidable advent of democracy; with obscurantist arguments, they oppose the more and more vehement aspirations of the numerous servile population. With its complacency, discourses and attitudes, the Mauritanian leading elite, while cultivating democratic ploys and window-dressing, feeds, behind curtains, strategies of avoidance, confusion and disappointment. They maintain a respectable façade in order to better contain the Hratin, Blacks, and other marginalised people aspiring to dignity, freedom and well-being, in a democratic and rationalist move that has been spreading all over the world among the peoples.

In spite of the weak influence of the country, we should not underestimate and we should watchfully monitor the ideological implication of its elites in the preparation of people's minds for the seizure of power by those segments of society who are most likely to cede to terrorism and intolerance. In this respect, our fight against slavery, religious fanaticism, sexism and racism partakes of resistance – of the free world – against the global threat!

Our fight is yours!

Biram Dah ABEID, President of IRA-Mauritania

Palais des Nations

Geneva, Switzerland