

**"It is necessary for the government to listen to what the citizens have to say."
(Kaédi, rurals)**

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE PARLIAMENT IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF MAURITANIA

**Qualitative research conducted on behalf of the
National Democratic Institute for International
Affairs (NDI) in July - August 2007**

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study is a component of a program designed to build the capacity of the Mauritanian Parliament Members, subsidized by the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), financed by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and undertaken by the *People's Mirror*.

NDI and the *People's Mirror* would like to thank the participants in the focus groups for their time, collaboration and their particularly active participation, confidence and enthusiasm.

NDI and the *People's Mirror* would like to thank Professor Sheik Saad Bou Kamara's team for their contribution and for their professionalism during the field work conducted for the focus groups. Professor Kamara's team, under the supervision of the *People's Mirror*, recruited focus group participants, moderated sessions and translated statements of focus group participants. Without the technical support of Professor Kamara's team, this research would not have been possible.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This analytical report is based on a qualitative study on the public perception of Parliament in Mauritania conducted by the *People's Mirror* on behalf of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI).

In July and August 2007, the *People's Mirror* conducted a qualitative study of 16 focus groups with citizens from the urban and rural areas of the cities of Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, Kaédi and Kiffa. The main goals of this study can be presented as follows:

- To analyze the public's perception of Parliament and of the newly-elected Members of the Parliament;
- To identify the expectations and the needs of citizens with regard to their leaders and their recently-elected institutions;
- To gauge the attitudes of citizens concerning the democratic and socioeconomic development of the country;
- To support democratic governance in Mauritania by allowing the opinions of various segments of the population to be taken into account.

The main results of the study are:

- Following the democratic transition, which brought promises of development and prosperity and expectations of socioeconomic progress that can strengthen the emerging democracy, the public perception of the country's general situation is fairly optimistic.
- The concerns and priorities of citizens relate directly to improvements in their daily life and the protection of the political progress achieved during the democratic transition.
- The most significant results of the democratic transition include freedom of expression, freedom of the press and the promotion of minority rights.
- Current priorities center on the social and economic promotion of citizens and include educational reforms, employment programs and poverty reduction.
- National reconciliation is both reassuring and worrying to citizens. The resolution of past conflicts would preserve the achievements of the democratic transition and would foster a peaceful coexistence, but the repatriation of the refugees is considered a potential source of instability and conflict, especially by the Afro-Mauritanian demographic.
- The perception of Parliament is positive, in part thanks to the broadcasting of parliamentary sessions, which have enabled the population to follow the chamber's proceedings and discussions.
- Members of Parliament are seen in a negative light and are often criticized for their lack of communication with citizens.
- Civil society is perceived positively and citizens encourage its cooperation with Parliament in order to increase local development and ensure the integration of the electorate's viewpoints in the legislative decision-making process.

- Citizens favor direct and interactive contact with their representatives and particularly desire the creation of permanent outreach structures, such as local offices, interactive radio and television programs, internet forums and regular public gatherings with Members of Parliament.

GENERAL MOOD

Mauritanian citizens are both cautiously optimistic and slightly concerned with regard to the prospect of improved living conditions. The different focus groups are receptive to the climate of positive change and development in the country. They do not, however, feel the repercussions of this development on their lives and their economic situations. Participants closely monitor measures taken by the government, particularly those relating to national reconciliation and the consolidation of democracy and are aware of the progress being made expanding individual liberties. Nonetheless, the majority of participants are more concerned about the socioeconomic problems that directly affect their daily lives, such as unemployment and increases of food prices.

"Alhamdulillah (Thank God), the country is developing." (Nouadhibou, urban woman)

"Change can occur all of a sudden, but I already feel that there is change in the air." (Nouakchott, woman, student)

Freedom of expression is a precious asset

Freedom of expression is often perceived as an asset to be preserved and valued. Since the democratic transition, the participants regularly point to freedom of expression as the most remarkable positive change in Mauritania, both at the individual and community levels.

For most participants, freedom of expression allows individuals to discuss the situation of the country without having to fear any form of retaliation. Middle-aged participants in particular identify the right to express themselves freely as a novelty that they associate with the democratic transition and the current government.

"I am satisfied with our President. We are here speaking, criticizing freely! And these are things to protect and enhance." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban)

"They gave us the power and the right to express ourselves." (Nouakchott, man, students)

"With the new system in power, the citizens are aware of their rights and are free to express themselves [.] Freedom of expression exists even though the country is still a young democracy." (Nouakchott, man, urban)

"It is not anymore like in the old days. The citizens are free and can express themselves freely." (Kiffa, woman, rural)

"Since 2005, freedom of expression has been the best thing that we ever had. In this group discussion, we are expressing ourselves freely. Now, people like you come to ask us for our point of view with regard to our country, and in the past, we didn't have this opportunity to speak freely." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban)

"This is the first time ever we can express ourselves freely and each one of us can say what he or she thinks." (Boulenouar, man, young)

"People can say what they think without having to hide." (Nouadhibou, man, urban)

Focus group participants also associate freedom of expression with media freedoms. Therefore, according to citizens, the current liberalization regarding freedom of expression will translate into an unprecedented access to information for the Mauritanian public. For the focus groups of Kaédi and Nouadhibou, in particular, freedom of expression takes the form of cultural pluralism in the media, making the press more accessible to the different ethnic groups of the country.

"Freedom of expression is positive. A lot of things used to happen in the dark and nobody knew about them, but now it is quite the opposite. Everything is clear." (Kaédi, man, young)

"Thanks to freedom of expression, we gained access to a lot of things that used to be confined in the corridors, especially through the media." (Nouadhibou, man, urban)

"All the ethnic groups now have a say on TV and on the radio." (Kaédi, woman, rural)

"The media were monopolized by only one ethnic group. Now, all ethnic groups have their place on the television and the radio." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban)

Democratic transition as a source of optimism

Among the positive changes raised by the participants, especially among males, is the democratic transition, which includes elections, the expanded role of the opposition and respect for minority rights. They perceive this as a precursor to future reforms or developments, and hope that democracy will be continued to ensure respect for the rights of the different ethnic groups that make up the Mauritanian state.

"There was change with no bullet fired. People are getting ready to recover democracy." (Nouakchott, man, student)

"For the first time ever, we have an independent unit for the elections." (Kiffa, man, urban, young)

"The role given to the opposition on the political stage is a good sign. The leader of the opposition is considered as a true political leader." (Nouadhibou, man, urban)

"From now on, all people from different colors are equal before justice." (Kiffa, man, rural)

"For quite a while, there was only one ethnic group that benefited from the riches of the country, it was actually the Moorish. Now, the power must enhance equality." (Kaédi, man, rural)

Positive views of the new government's major initiatives

Generally, the image of the current government among citizens is positive. Participants are aware of both the government's leading initiatives and its efforts to communicate more effectively with the people. This perception reinforces the general public feeling that positive change is taking place in the country, even when its impact on citizens' living conditions is not yet perceptible.

"They cannot solve all the problems at once, it is necessary to give them more time, they must see to the well-being of the population." (Kiffa, man, rural)

The focus group participants are particularly interested in the law relating to transparency and to the declaration of property. For some, this measure would showcase the strength of the current government and guarantee against embezzlement of public funds, corruption and impunity. Furthermore, constitutional amendments which limit the president's mandate, the organization of different ministries and above all, the government's effective mobilization after the floods in Tintan are often pointed out as positive elements of the government. The decision to cut the salaries of the president and the ministers is particularly viewed as an additional sign of good will of the current government. Nonetheless, a number of younger participants assert that they are not receptive to the government's communication efforts and request concrete improvements of their conditions.

"It's a good thing to see that the president made a trip to Tintan. That means that he cares about his people's problems." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban)

"I think that they want to show us that they came to bring about change." (Kaédi, woman, rural)

"The constitution and the president's mandate limited to five years are good things." (Boulenouar, man, young)

"The road map of the ministries is a good decision." (Nouakchott, man, urban)

"This decision [to cut the salaries by 25%] helps reinforce the economy of the country and shows that they want to work and develop the country." (Kaédi, woman, rural)

"They took a decision without justifying it. What's the benefit? We are not asking them to cut their salaries but to solve our problems; they have done this to relieve people a little bit." (Kiffa, man, urban, young)

"Now, we can realize what has been stolen at the end of the mandate of the ministers if they declare their property." (Nouakchott, woman, student)

"It is an index of transparency, but it is necessary to declare all their property and not put property in the name of their sons and wives." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban, young)

"That is going to allow us to know if the public goods have been stolen or not." (Kaédi, woman, urban, young)

"This decision to declare the property of the civil servants is the best decision ever taken by a president, there will now be control." (Kiffa, woman, rural)

Economic development remains a priority

Despite the optimistic reactions of most participants, the concerns of the target groups primarily stem from their economic difficulties. As a result, the focus groups reveal some impatience concerning the direct and positive affect of economic development on the daily lives of the Mauritians. Women participants point to the high costs of living, the low quality of education and the spikes in food prices as particular causes for concern. While male groups share the same apprehensions, a sizeable number of participants, especially those of Afro-Mauritanian descent, hope for more equality between the different ethnic groups, while recognizing the progress achieved by the new government in this area.

"I haven't yet seen anything new. The prices are still high, the pupils are badly taught... There was no real change, everything is expensive." (Kiffa, woman, rural)

"Everything is so expensive. One can buy neither a bucket of water nor an apartment." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban)

"Education is increasingly deteriorating and the quality of education in public schools is very low." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban, Young)

"The problems are still persisting, they didn't do anything again." (Nouakchott, man, student)

"The costs of living, especially the essential foodstuffs, are still expensive." (Nouakchott, man, urban)

"The level of education is declining, the cost of living is high, hygiene in the cities and the villages is bad, the villages and the cities are not clean; and that's the cause of diseases." (Kaédi, woman, rural)

"The Pulars, the Wolofs and the Soninkes cannot read the laws. Their languages and their dialects are marginalized." (Kaédi, man, rural)

"All along the river, no one watches Mauritanian television since they do not understand anything and feel that it is not their television." (Kaédi, man, rural)

PARTICIPANTS' PRIORITIES

The focus groups reveal that the priorities of the participants relate mainly to improvements in their daily lives through educational reform, a reduction of unemployment and poverty, and the improvement of basic infrastructures. Issues relating to national reconciliation and the consolidation of democracy in Mauritania seem to be among the main concerns of many participants, who acknowledge their importance for the development and the stability of the country, even if they do not consider these topics as priorities.

"Our nation is sick and tired, it has got a lot of problems, but I think that they will manage to solve them in the future." (Nouakchott, woman, student)

Education and literacy

According to the participants from all focus groups, improving education remains the citizens' first priority in Mauritania. Many respondents deplore the high illiteracy rate, the mediocre quality of education and its consequence on the country's development. Participants feel that reforming education and reducing illiteracy will allow many Mauritians to engage in revenue-generating activities and mitigate poverty.

"Thanks to knowledge and education, one can develop herself. Education is essential. All the nations have progressed only thanks to education." (Nouakchott, woman, student)

"If the problem of illiteracy is solved, there will be neither unemployment nor crime. Drop-outs end up as criminals." (Nouadhibou, man, urban)

"The school has been disregarded in Mauritania. The teachers do not give enough time to children. You see a child in 6th grade that does not know how to read even." (Kaédi, woman, urban, Young)

"An illiterate person is just like an animal or a blind person. With a little knowledge, you can survive, with more knowledge, you earn more." (Kaédi, woman, rural)

"Education is not good in our country, and we do not give it any importance, while it is the basis of everything. It is necessary to focus on education, otherwise nothing will work." (Kiffa, woman, urban, young)

Employment and fighting poverty

Unemployment and poverty represent both a challenge and an obsession for citizens from all groups. Participants describe the difficulty of accessing employment or revenue-generating activities as an endemic problem in their communities which exacerbates crime and corruption. Urban participants associate poverty with unemployment, and recommend greater investment to absorb the large number of young graduates into the employment sector. Concurrently, rural participants suggest the creation of revenue-generating projects and local cooperatives as alternatives to employment in public administration.

"The lack of employment generates violence, slavery and crime." (Nouakchott, man, urban)

"There are resources in Mauritania. The good management of these resources will help solve the problem of unemployment and poverty." (Kaédi, woman, urban, young)

"Unemployment causes poverty. A lot of youngsters get degrees from overseas, yet they don't find any work here." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban, young)

"It is necessary to help people start some small businesses." (Kaédi, woman, rural)

"People must set up NGOs and cooperatives, and the state must subsidize their projects." (Kaédi, woman, rural)

"It is necessary to open some centers to help the young to create revenue-generating projects." (Kaédi, woman, urban, young)

National reconciliation and the return of the refugees

The participants agree on the importance of national reconciliation to the stability and the development of the country, even if they have difficulty agreeing on its parameters. On the other hand, the potential return of the refugees raises some concerns among the participants.

"You can't belong to a nation and at the same time be a foreigner in that very country." (Nouakchott, woman, urban, student)

National reconciliation is considered as a prerequisite for the development of the country, according to the majority of the participants. Even though the theme of reconciliation does not emerge naturally or spontaneously during the discussions of focus groups, all participants agree on its importance. Many define it as an "understanding" to ensure the "coexistence" of different Mauritanian ethnic groups, and the majority associates it with the repatriation of refugees.

"We definitely have to go through an understanding and agreement in order to move on to the future, because one won't make it without that. We need to stay together to progress." (Nouakchott, man, student)

"Reconciliation is very important for us to live together. The Mauritians must unite to build their country and leave the other things behind." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban, young)

"The government must take all the necessary measures to help the deportees get back; otherwise there will be no national reconciliation." (Nouakchott, man, urban)

The participants feel that reconciliation would also reduce the likelihood of potential future conflict in the country. They voice their concerns by referring to the likelihood of "problems," crises and even of "civil war," which is of particular concern among groups from Kaédi and Kiffa.

"Without reconciliation, there will be problems and we will be never able to progress." (Boulénouar, man, Young)

"Understanding and reconciliation are necessary between the citizens, otherwise the State can't develop, and this also necessary to avoid civil war." (Kiffa, man, rural)

"Reconciliation is the basis of everything. Without it, there will be a war which will generate more poverty." (Kaédi, woman, rural)

"In order for the citizens to coexist, reconciliation is necessary. Otherwise, there will always be problems." (Kiffa, man, urban, young)

The repatriation of the refugees, on the other hand, remains a contentious issue among the participants. The urban groups, and women in particular, feel that the return of the refugees is an indispensable step towards national reconciliation for both humanitarian and political reasons. While recognizing the refugees' right to return to their homeland, the rural and younger groups in particular harbor a degree of mistrust of the repatriation process. The groups of Kaédi and Kiffa feel especially threatened by the prospect of an imminent return of the refugees, and underline that a massive return could jeopardize the precarious socioeconomic balance of their regions.

"These are Mauritians like us, they have been expelled from their country. It's certainly a good thing if they return to their country." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban)

"How are they going to get back? I need to know how they will return! [...] If the refugees come back, there will be more poverty." (Boulénouar, man, young)

"Before getting to the problem of the refugees, we need to solve the national problems." (Kiffa, man, urban, young)

"We are almost refugees, we have the same problems. Therefore, before picking the fruits on the tree, we need to start with the ones on the ground." (Kaédi, man, rural)

"When these refugees come back, they'll have to go somewhere. Where are we going to put them?" (Kaédi, man, rural)

"It is not beneficial to us if the refugees come back." (Boulenouar, man, young)

For the urban groups, apprehension and misgivings relating to the return of the refugees are less obvious. The majority think the solution lies in accurately selecting candidates for return to avoid the repatriation of non-Mauritanians, as well as implementing reintegration programs to help returnees integrate smoothly into society.

"We need to make them come back and give them their rights. We must return to them their land and their houses and we must integrate them in the economy." (Kaédi, woman, urban, young)

"The state is currently on the right track, but they must give some indemnities to the refugees to integrate them. It is also necessary to count the families who suffered here in Mauritania." (Nouakchott, man, student)

"The High Commission for the Refugees had counted the Mauritanians in Senegal. Any individual not counted by the High Commission for the Refugees should not be considered as a refugee." (Nouakchott, man, urban)

"The Mauritanians who immigrated to Mali and Senegal must not be considered refugees." (Nouakchott, man, urban)

"The refugees are our brothers and we must receive them with open arms, but we need to be cautious, otherwise the other Africans from Senegal and Mali will get into the country and claim that they are Mauritanians." (Nouakchott, man, student)

PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARLIAMENT

The public perception of Parliament and its Members

The focus groups indicate that the perception of Parliament as an institution among the target groups is rather positive, while that of the members of Parliament (MPs) is negative. The participants are not well informed about the role and the prerogatives of their deputies, but still express their desire to establish permanent and efficient structures of communication with their deputies. They also hope to see stronger collaboration between MPs and civil society to enhance local development and improve contact between the citizens and their representatives.

"The deputy? He or she should defend the rights of the citizens, help civil society, create development projects and help the citizens solve their problems." (Kiffa, woman, urban, young)

Overall, the participants hold a positive image of Parliament as an institution. Apart from a small minority of rural participants who admit to not understanding the role and significance of Parliament, most participants mention the role of representation first, then that of legislation and finally that of oversight of the executive.

"The parliament is a mediator between the citizens and the government. It has been elected to put the problems of the citizens before the government." (Nouakchott, man, urban, student)

"I do not see what the role of the parliament in Mauritania is." (Kaédi, man, rural)

"Actually, we are not educated and we aren't politicians, and we don't know the role of the parliament." (Kiffa, woman, rural)

"It is the mouthpiece of the people before the government and the President of the Republic." (Nouadhibou, man, urban)

"All projects go through the parliament. It is the parliament that decides; so it is important." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban, young)

The positive perception of Parliament is also tied to the recent broadcasting of the parliamentary sessions, which, according to the participants, have helped citizens not only gain a better understanding of the institution, but also to appreciate the difference between the present

parliament and its predecessors. Women's groups, in particular, point to the radio and television programs relating to parliamentary issues as the predominant source creating awareness of the role and importance of Parliament.

"When we look at the parliamentary sessions, we understand a lot of things on the problems of the country." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban, adult)

"You follow every day proceedings in the parliament and you see that they are defending our causes before the government, and it is something that we never saw. These broadcasts became my favorite broadcasts. I now have a lot of respect for Parliament." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban, adult)

"The current parliament is not like the previous one. One hears on the radio and one sees on TV that they are indeed working." (Kiffa, man, rural)

The public image of MPs is less flattering and their role is not very well perceived by the majority of the participants. They often describe the prerogatives of the deputies in terms of the services delivered to the people and the voters, as this function is seen as the *raison d'être* of every deputy. The MPs are elected "to solve the problems" of the country, of the area and of the citizens, and these problems include national issues such as corruption and unemployment and local issues such as access to water in villages or support for women's projects certain areas.

"They've been elected to Parliament for us; they should be present to solve our problems." (Kaédi, woman, urban, young)

"Their role it is to lobby for the local organizations and to help them get funds." (Kaédi, woman, urban, young)

"The deputy is actually the one who represents us at the government and who makes sure that the government is on the right track." (Kaédi, man, rural)

"The deputies are the people's representatives. As they know the actual problems of the citizens, they should deal with them individually." (Nouakchott, man, urban)

"Their role consists of undertaking development projects." (Kaédi, woman, urban, young)

"They should oversee the state and should object in case the government decides something that is not beneficial to the citizens." (Kaédi, woman, urban, young)

"They are elected to visit the citizens in the field." (Nouakchott, man, urban, student)

"Every deputy speaks of the problems in his or her district and he or she is going to ask for help." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban, young)

"They should help people to access water." (Kaédi, woman, urban, young)

"We know that a deputy should solve the problems of the society, but we don't know how." (Kiffa, woman, rural)

The main reproach of elected officials' performance, regardless of the roles assigned to them by citizens, is that they do not generate any concrete or credible results for citizens. According to the majority of participants, the deputies are not qualified for their roles in public life in the country. They are not perceived as active agents of development, whereas the parliament is chosen by the participants as one of the main actors of development.

"They have a particular case! They are there just during the elections; they do not have a role in Mauritania." (Kiffa, woman, rural)

"For the parliament, it does not do anything good, the Members of Parliament become richer, take the decisions that seem good to them and forget largely the rest of the population." (Nouakchott, man, urban)

"They didn't do anything for the people; it is their turn to denounce the social problems and to expose them before the government. The deputies do not play their roles." (Nouakchott, man, student)

The negative image of the MPs can be mainly attributed to the lack of communication between citizens and their elected officials, a recurrent theme among the groups. Many participants affirm that the deputies rarely make efforts to engage the population, and reach out to citizens only during the elections. Therefore, the participants say that they have lost confidence in the MPs and in their promises.

"They come just to ask us to vote for them and disappear afterwards." (Kaédi, man, rural)

"We know them just at elections time. Outside this period, you never see them." (Kiffa, woman, rural)

"Since we voted for them, we haven't seen anything. As soon as they are elected, you lose sight of them." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban)

"When you meet the deputies, they give you the promises they do not intend to fulfill." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban)

"They do not work. You see them during the elections, and that's all. You don't even know if they are in the city or elsewhere." (Kaédi, man, urban, young)

"They are not interested in us and we don't see them. They do not try to see us anymore until the next elections." (Nouakchott, woman, urban)

"We don't even know their names and their offices. Some of them open their offices during the elections. After the elections, they close them and disappear."
(Nouakchott, woman, urban, student)

"Some open some offices during the elections and after the elections you never see them again." (Nouakchott, man, urban, student)

"Some have offices only during the elections, and after that they disappear."
(Boulénouar, man, urban, young)

"You never see the deputies anymore after you have voted for them. They don't even know whether we are alive or dead. During the country, my deputy used to come to see me. But since I voted for him, I could not see it." (Nouadhibou, man, urban)

"We haven't seen them since the elections. They have disappeared; they haven't come to see us. We do not know what they are doing." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban)

"My deputy, I only see him during the election campaign." (Kaédi, woman, urban, young)

"They come and tell us the things that are not clear; they don't even listen to our ideas and what we have to say; they finish their speeches and they leave."
(Kaédi, man, rural)

"No, we don't even know our deputy. He can't be found; he doesn't have an office here." (Kiffa, woman, rural)

"We don't know them; we see them just during election time." (Kiffa, woman, urban, young)

Parliament and civil society

The participants attach much importance to the role of civil society, which is described as an important actor in the country's development. Civil society is also praised for its proximity to the population and commitment in the field. Unlike the deputies, civil society activists are well versed in local specificities and the challenges and the expectations of the citizens. Therefore, participants recommend an efficient collaboration between the deputies and civil society.

"The relationship between the parliament and civil society is that of support and consolidation. The two converge toward the citizens. The civil society's role is to represent the problems of the citizens and the parliament's role is to represent them to the government." (Nouakchott, man, student)

"The civil society is in direct contact with the citizens and can play the mediator's role. Civil society is much closer to the population than the deputies, so they can help the deputies understand the problems of the people." (Nouadhibou, man, urban)

"They have an important role because they work in the field." (Kaédi, man, urban, young)

"The NGOs can be a bridge for the deputies in the field. A woman who works for an NGO knows the problems of the people. She can therefore communicate them to the deputies." (Nouadhibou, woman, urban)

Collaboration between the deputies and civil society is manifested in support for the development of projects at the local level, according to some participants. For others, civil society is an influential force that informs the deputies on law and politics according to the mentality and the attitudes of the citizens. The vast majority of participants—in addition to their confidence in the capacity of civil society to respond to the needs of development in their country—thinks that deputies should back the efforts of the NGOs and help them in the conception as well as the financing and the implementation of the projects.

"The Members of Parliament can help to develop civil society, especially with regards to fighting poverty." (Boulenouar, man, urban, young)

"At Kaédi, civil society made a lot of projects. The parliament should help civil society to develop some projects at the local level. They should find funds for them." (Kaédi, man, urban, young)

"The parliament should help the civil society to start development projects." (Nouakchott, man, urban)

"Sometimes, the government imposes some laws on the deputies. In this case, the deputies should call on the civil society to decide." (Nouakchott, man, urban)

The needs for communication: permanence and visibility

Overall, participants prefer direct and permanent communication with their deputies, and exhibit a clear preference for interactive communication through the media, such as radio and television programs, or through public assemblies held in villages, localities and districts. Participants stress the necessity to discuss issues with their deputies and exchange opinions. For youth, the Internet can be used as a form of communication with their representatives. They hope to see the deputies invest in new technologies to better engage youth.

Participants attach particular importance to deputies' permanent offices, which permit citizens to contact their representatives, to submit their grievances and to express their thoughts on laws submitted to vote and governmental measures underway. These permanent offices ensure communication between the voters and the deputies between elections.

"We need to hand over our problems to him; he should ask for our opinion before discussing or voting on a law." (Kaédi, man, rural)

"He should be available and should meet with the citizens so that they tell him about their problems. If he doesn't want to assume responsibility, he should leave

his seat, he should open an office so that the citizens tell him about their problems." (Kiffa, woman, rural)

"Yes, that is going to help us put our problems upfront, when he has an office close to the citizens, he is going to help them." (Kiffa, man, rural)

"If there is an office, everybody will be able to find it, how can you possibly find him if he has no office." (Nouakchott, man, student)

"He should have it, in this way citizens who want to tell him about their problems can contact him easily." (Kiffa, man, urban, young)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main results of the qualitative study on the public perception of Parliament in Mauritania can be summarized as follows:

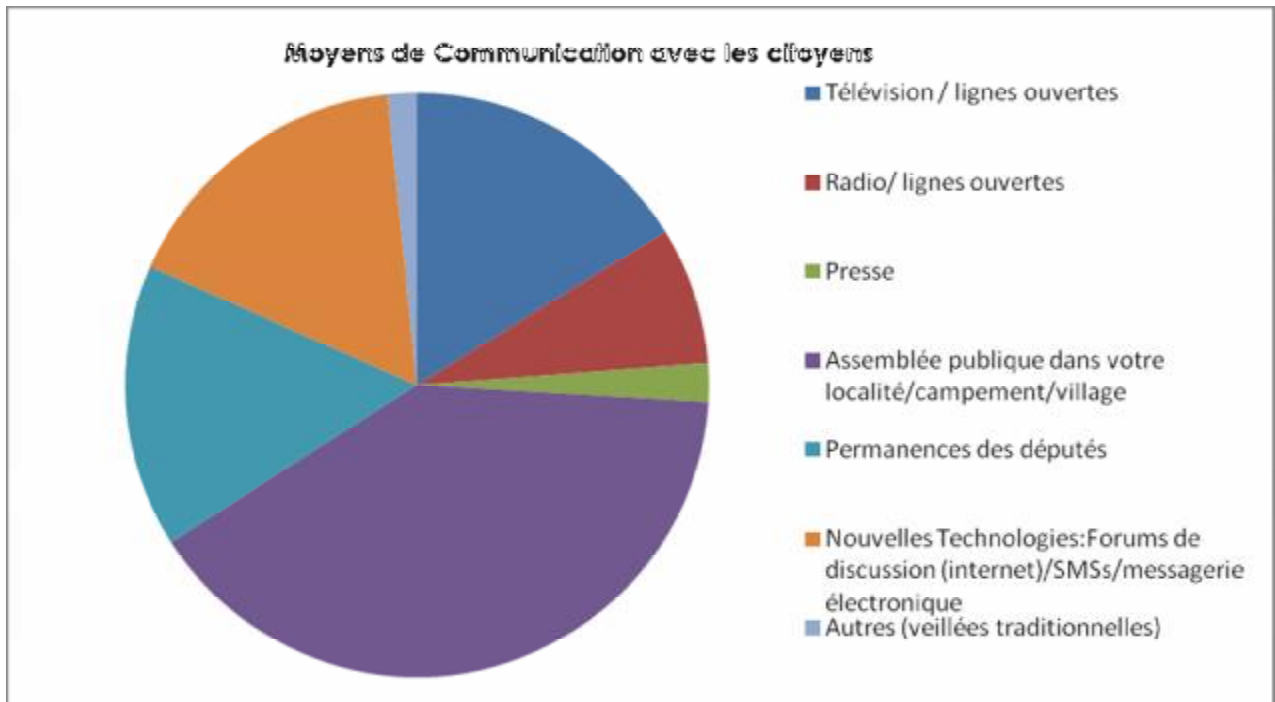
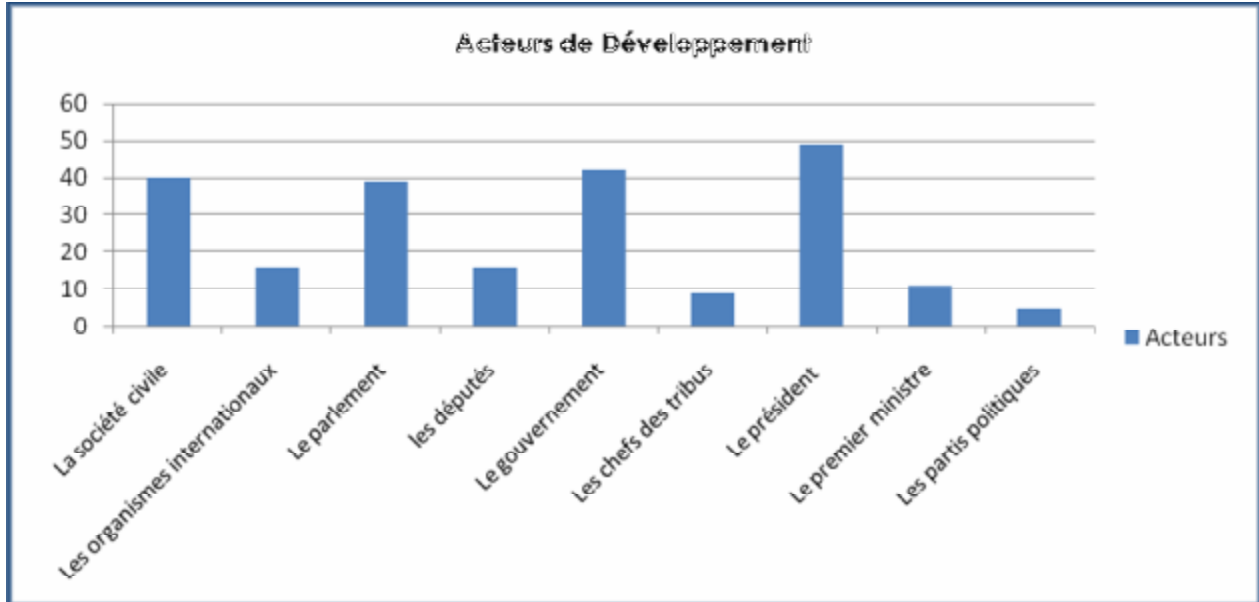
- Participants prioritize educational reform, employment and poverty reduction. The choice of these three main areas reflects concern for stability and prosperity. Democratization has created a climate of optimism—partially due to increased freedom of expression—regarding leading initiatives of the government and its efforts to ensure ethnic plurality in the media and the government. Recent steps toward democratization have also allowed citizens to develop specific expectations of the state, namely to improve living conditions, education and social mobility, create tools for generating income and promote overall development.
- National reconciliation is a necessity for Mauritians and a source of both hope and concern. The interest of participants in national reconciliation is motivated by both humanitarian arguments and more pragmatic concerns relating to coexistence. Citizens recognize both the progress and fragility of the democratic transition; they are aware of the potential for the reconciliation process to either strengthen or corrode these political successes. Reactions to the refugee repatriation process illustrate public concern over imbalances and overflows threatening stability and prosperity.
- Despite the limited knowledge of citizens, they have a positive perception of Parliament as an institution, and are aware of the difference of this parliament compared to those of the past. However, participants have a negative perception of parliamentary deputies, asserting that MPs are not prepared for their crucial roles in the institution.
- The primary problem between the deputies and the voters is that of communication. Citizens blame the deputies for their absence in their districts, their lack of commitment to local development and their lack of communication with the voters.
- Voters demand more consistent contact between deputies and citizens, a partnership for development between deputies and civil society, and a greater interest among deputies in the priorities of the citizens.

Recommendations to assuage the crisis between the deputies and the citizens include the following:

- A communication strategy: the parliament should launch a communication and awareness campaign on the role of Parliament and its deputies.
- Bridges of communication between the deputies and civil society: the deputies and civil society groups should build structures of collaboration that would allow deputies to support projects of development at the local level, maintain direct contact with the people and address their needs and priorities.

- Permanent local offices for MPs: the deputies should open permanent offices in their districts and not just engage citizens during election campaigns. These offices can be located on the premises of their affiliated political parties.
 - An efficient use of the information technology: the deputies should use new technologies in Mauritania, such as SMS messages, internet forums and also interactive TV and radio programs.
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APPENDIX



ABOUT NDI

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a non-profit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

Democracy depends on legislatures that represent citizens and oversee the executive, independent judiciaries that safeguard the rule of law, political parties that are open and accountable, and elections in which voters freely choose their representatives in government. Acting as a catalyst for democratic development, NDI bolsters the institutions and processes that allow democracy to flourish.

§ **Build Political and Civic Organizations:** NDI helps build the stable, broad-based and well-organized institutions that form the foundation of a strong civic culture. Democracy depends on these mediating institutions—the voice of an informed citizenry, which link citizens to their government and to one another by providing avenues for participation in public policy.

§ **Safeguard Elections:** NDI promotes open and democratic elections. Political parties and governments have asked NDI to study electoral codes and to recommend improvements. The Institute also provides technical assistance for political parties and civic groups to conduct voter education campaigns and to organize election monitoring programs. NDI is a world leader in election monitoring, having organized international delegations to monitor elections in dozens of countries, helping to ensure that polling results reflect the will of the people.

§ **Promote Openness and Accountability:** NDI responds to requests from leaders of government, parliament, political parties and civic groups seeking advice on matters from legislative procedures to constituent service to balance of civil-military relations in a democracy. NDI works to build legislatures and local governments that are professional, accountable, open and responsive to their citizens.

International cooperation is key to promoting democracy effectively and efficiently. It also conveys a deeper message to new and emerging democracies that while autocracies are inherently isolated and fearful of the outside world, democracies can count on international allies and an active support system. Headquartered in Washington D.C., with field offices in every region of the world, NDI complements the skills of its staff by enlisting volunteer experts from around the world, many of whom are veterans of democratic struggles in their own countries and share valuable perspectives on democratic development.

ABOUT THE PEOPLE'S MIRROR

The *People's Mirror* is one of the first centers of its kind in the Arab world, specializing in public opinion research on social and political issues. Located in Rabat, Morocco, the *People's Mirror* works to establish a link between decision-makers and citizens and to enable clients to run successful, cost-effective projects.

Using qualitative research, the *People's Mirror* reflects citizens' priorities and perceptions on a variety of important projects that are as diversified as its clients. Its wide-ranging experience includes helping clients to evaluate concepts, policies and messages; develop campaigns; conduct needs assessments; test website concept and usability; and plan for or supplement quantitative research. The *People's Mirror* works closely with clients to translate research findings into concrete action and cost-saving measures.

The *People's Mirror* has the capacity and expertise to conduct qualitative research in its fully-equipped center in Rabat and, using state-of-the-art portable equipment, throughout urban and rural regions in the Middle East and Africa. Its services are provided in several languages, including Arabic, Amazighe, French and English.

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