



Arab Reform Brief

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Political Transition in Mauritania: In for Another Coup?

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Although Mauritania is witnessing a reconfiguration of the political arena following the collapse of Ould al-Taya's regime that lasted almost twenty years, a number of factors have contributed to making civilian rule a short term experiment.

The country's ninth *coup d'état*, on August 6th 2008, came as no surprise to those who had been following the acute crisis that had befallen former President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi's regime during the previous months.

Following the overthrow of Ould al-Taya's regime in August 2005, the transitional period was administered by a military junta. Backed by the military establishment, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi ran for presidential elections. In April 2008, his inauguration as President was initially accepted by all sides: proof that the first peaceful transfer of power in their country's history was taking place.

It remains to be seen whether the military has succeeded in tightening its grip over the situation, despite the ferocity of domestic and international opposition to their coup. If so, the chances are high that either a general will stand in presidential elections and rule the country in civilian garb, or that Mauritania is destined to experience a tenth coup.

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The Transitional Period: Building on weak foundations

The transitional period that followed the military overthrow of Ould al-Taya's regime in August 2005 lasted for nineteen months, during which the country's affairs were administered by a military junta. The junta arranged for "consultation days" with all the country's political forces, which resulted in an agreement over a reform package, featuring a constitutional amendment and a timetable for elections.

The military gave guarantees that helped bolster Mauritians' confidence in the credibility of their discourse, most significantly by enacting a law that banned members of the military junta and the transitional government from standing for election. International support, in the form of funds and election monitoring, helped lend it further legitimacy.

Nevertheless, Mauritians were quick to detect an unwillingness on the part of the military leaders to address a number of issues that they considered fundamental, such as holding accountable those who misappropriated public funds; eradicating the human legacy left by the waves of oppression against Blacks; and tackling the vestiges of slavery. This deliberate disregard encouraged accusations that the primary motive behind the coup had not been to make a clean break with Ould al-Taya's style of governance, but merely to salvage whatever possible of the old regime, and to contain the popular anger that had begun to grow dangerously towards the end of Ould al-Taya's reign, and which had been the driving force behind destabilizing, abortive coups like that of June 2003.

During the transitional period the military refused to discuss any proposal to restrict the role of the army and military establishment within the democratic regime. Moreover, the

professed neutrality of the army did not prevent members of the Military Council from interfering and instructing politicians to take certain actions. During the campaign that preceded the legislative elections, many politicians left their parties at the direction of those Council members, to form what subsequently became known as the "bloc of independents". At the start of the presidential election campaign these independents formed the nucleus of supporters of the independent candidate Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. Many spoke of pressures that were exerted on the traditional notables to support his candidacy, though the military establishment continued to deny such intervention until the last minute, and to re-reiterate that it was keeping its promise of remaining neutral.

It was only recently that Mauritians discovered the accuracy of the rumors at that time. This happened as a consequence of a television interview a few days prior to the last coup, during which President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi admitted that two members of the Military Council had backed his candidacy. Despite this support, strong competition forced him to run a second round of elections, one which he would not have won, were it not for alliances he forged with two main candidates, one of whom was Messaoud Ould Belkheir who represented the Harateen community (former slaves), and the second, Zine Ould Zidane, who enjoyed support from the eastern regions-his place of origin. In return, the former was appointed President of the National Assembly (NA), while the latter became First Minister.

When this process resulted, in April 2006, in the inauguration of Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, the result was accepted by all, and it seemed that all sides were prepared to leave past events behind. Mauritians were also captivated by the first peaceful transfer of power in their history, and the weight given by the media to what was

portrayed as a precedent in the Arab world. It also gave Mauritians a huge sense of pride and hope for a better future.

The Period of Civilian Rule: April 2006 to August 6th, 2008

When Ould Cheikh Abdallahi assumed office, he was already burdened with the debts and promises of his campaign. Besides the obligations that he owed to the political alliances that had enabled his victory in the second round of elections, those who had backed him expected him to return the “favor”. As anticipated, he charged Zine Ould Zidane with forming the first civilian government. However, rather than including the spectrum of political forces that had supported the president within the government, Zidane chose new faces that were not considered representative of the political leaders who had supported him.

Most members of the Military Council continued to occupy their positions within the army, notably the two most powerful officers, Ould Abdel Aziz and Ould El-Ghazouani. Both were promoted to the rank of general by the president, with the former being appointed as Special Chief of Staff and the latter as Chief of Armed Forces.

It should be recalled that these two officers had played a major role in planning the coup that ousted Ould al-Taya. They managed to hold onto power, due to their relatively long experience and the sensitive nature of the positions that they occupied, all of which allowed them to exercise absolute control over the armed forces and the security apparatus.

Despite the brevity of Ould Cheikh Abdallahi’s spell in power, his regime witnessed some considerable achievements. Discussions were held for the first time on major issues that have long posed an imminent danger to the country.

For example, an Islamic party was licensed for the first time in order both to bring it within the parameters of legitimate politics, and to prevent exclusion from political participation from radicalizing its members. In response to the demands of a large section of society, a law was promulgated to criminalize slavery, which had been undermining social peace and stability.

The president had also decided to confront the legacy of decades of tension between the Arab and Black constituencies. An official apology was made by him on behalf of Mauritania to the victims of the wave of oppression that had followed the events of 1989 and 1990. Consultation days were also held to discuss the possible repatriation of Mauritanian refugees from abroad and an agency was established to help them to reclaim their rights. The country then started receiving the first waves of returning refugees.

In the field of financial administration a number of reforms were announced, including the enactment of a transparency law that obligated senior government employees to declare their wealth prior to taking on public office. The country’s positive image abroad also made it attractive to stability-seeking foreign investors, and diplomatic activity helped to draw in capital.

However, this short period was not without problems. The global food crisis cast its shadow over Mauritania, a country that is heavily dependent on international aid for its food. The collapse in oil production dashed hopes of producing a surplus that would allow the deficit generated by decades of poor governance to be addressed. All this coincided with a rising insecurity resulting from growing crime rates, which branches of al-Qaeda exploited to launch terror attacks against elements within the army and foreign tourists. Vast quantities of drugs were confiscated and members of several smuggling networks were arrested.

The crisis soon began to have an impact on the daily lives of ordinary citizens in the form of soaring food prices, which sparked demonstrations in several Mauritanian cities and created a general feeling of popular discontent. The president later attempted to contain this sedition by announcing a series of measures including a wage increase and an emergency intervention plan to assist vulnerable social groups.

At the political level, figures close to the president began to voice the need for a political framework that would succeed in including the groups that had backed his rise to power. Many interpreted this as an attempt to re-form the state party.

Efforts made with the blessing the president and overseen by figures close to him led to the formation of the National Pact for Democracy and Development party (NPDD), which brought together the independents and parties that had supported the president's candidacy. After the party's inaugural conference, many noted the return to the forefront of many leading figures from Ould al-Taya's regime, with several winning seats in the parliamentary elections and others entrusted by the president with major state responsibilities. Their reinstatement led to public frustration, and dashed hopes that the political system could be renewed, leaving those who had backed the coup to overthrow Ould al-Taya fearful of the return of his regime, their potential dismissal and even punishment.

The Beginnings of the Crisis: May 2008

One of the main demands made by the founders of the NPDD, a party to which a majority of MPs belonged, was to dispose with Zine Ould Zidane's technocrat government and put together a party-based government composed of Ould Cheikh Abdallahi's supporters. In compliance with this demand, the president

dismissed the Zidane government and appointed a new government headed by Ould El-Ouakef, who simultaneously held the position of NPDD leader.

Faced with the pressure of a wave of public discontent over the economic situation, which some opposition elements were beginning to turn to their advantage, the president ordered the First Minister-designate to hold consultations over the formation of the new government, and to include the opposition. Two opposition parties joined the government, namely Tawasul (Islamic) and the Union of Forces of Progress (leftist). Once the formation of the new government was declared, many were surprised to find that it included individuals that were considered "symbols of corruption", and who were former ministers and officials from Ould al-Taya's governments accused of embezzling public funds.

Directly after the government was formed, members of the parliamentary majority rushed to express their disappointment. In addition to the fact that the ruling party coalition viewed the inclusion of opposition parties as an attempt to reduce their designated number of seats, it also raised the indignation of some members of the NPDD at their exclusion from the government. First there was a wave of resignations from the party, including most of the deputies in parliament who had helped to found it. They then submitted a motion of no-confidence against the government.

From the outset, it was apparent that the MPs who sought the no-confidence motion and the NPDD party members who supported them were linked to generals Ould Abdel Aziz and Ould Elghazouani. The declared reason for seeking such a motion was that the government included figures associated with the regime of Ould al-Taya.

Initially, President Ould Cheikh Abdallahi attempted to open a dialogue with those MPs and later, in a speech to the nation, threatened to use his powers to dissolve the NA. However, he withdrew this threat, dismissed the government and charged the same first minister (Ould El-Waghef) with forming a new one. To mitigate the MPs' indignation, Ould El-Waghef excluded the most prominent members of Ould al-Taya's regime from the new setup and apologized to the opposition parties for having included them.

All sides hoped this would mark the end of the crisis. However, tensions persisted and some of those who had resigned from the NPDD began to demand the resignation of Ould Cheikh Abdallahi for what they claimed to be his inability to manage state affairs. Others began to hint that the army's intervention might be necessary to end Ould Cheikh Abdallahi's rule.

In the ensuing war of statements, NA members demanded the convening of an emergency session to discuss a number of legislations, most notably the law establishing the high court of justice authorized to try the president of the republic and senior officials, and the formation of a parliamentary commission of inquiry into allegations that a charitable organization run by the president's wife had received state privileges. However, the government refused the request to hold an emergency session on the pretext that it had not been submitted by the President of the NA.

It was clear from the atmosphere surrounding the crisis that the president had reached a deadlock in his conflict with the MPs and their political supporters, and military men who were inciting rebellion, and that his only options were either to resign or to take on his opponents. This meant one of two things: either the dissolution of the NA and a call for early legislative elections or the dismissal of the two generals and a confrontation with the powerful

military establishment. Evidently, the president chose to risk a direct confrontation with the military and at dawn on 6 August 2008, he issued a presidential decree to dismiss the four Chiefs of Staff.

Mauritanians did not have to wait long for the army's response: two hours after the decree was published the dismissed officers declared that they had seized power, removed the president and cancelled the decree.

Post-Coup Reactions

Following the coup, the domestic political arena was split into three camps:

1° The first supported and welcomed the coup. It included the deputies who had defected from the NPDD, and who constituted a majority of deputies in both chambers (the NA and the Senate), and most of the political groupings that had made up the pro-Ould Cheikh Abdallahi majority.

2° The Democratic Forces Bloc (DFB), the largest opposition party, announced that it supported the coup, along with HATEM, a party represented in the parliament, and the Alliance for Justice and Democracy, which represents Black nationalists. These parties held President Ould Cheikh Abdallahi responsible for the political impasse and the failure of civilian rule. They demanded that the military be guided by the experience of the previous transitional period, a deadline for organizing a fresh round of presidential elections, and that the military remain neutral.

3° The NPDD, the Islamic party Tawasul, the Progressive Popular Alliance, whose leader Messaoud Ould Belkheir was NA President, and the leftist Forces of the Progress party all rejected the coup and formed what is currently referred to as the National Front for the Defence of Democracy (NFDD). This front

called for the reinstatement of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and refused to deal with the military.

At the international level, most states denounced the coup that deposed an elected president and some international actors translated their criticism into punitive measures. For example, the African Union suspended Mauritania's membership, the US administration froze non-humanitarian aid, and the European Union signaled that it would impose sanctions unless a solution was found.

Within the Arab world, it is worth noting that the Assistant Secretary General of the Arab League Mr. Ahmed Ben Hali had, during an official visit, expressed understanding, and had refrained from criticizing the coup, stating that the League's primary concern was to preserve stability in Mauritania.

The position of the Arab League reflected divisions among Arab states in their positions towards the coup. Thus while Morocco has shown implicit support for the coup instigators, Algeria has been leading diplomatic efforts to step up sanctions against them.

The Gridlock Continues

Today, a few months after the coup of the 6th of August, the political arena remains in gridlock and there have been few developments, other than the DFB's refusal to participate in the military-appointed civilian government. The party justified its rejection by claiming that the assurances it had received from the High Council of State (*Al Majlis Al Ala Lidawwla*) over the impartiality of the presidential elections were inadequate. An extraordinary parliamentary session was convened that was boycotted by NFDD deputies, including NA President Messaoud Ould Belkheir. The President of the Senate was also absent.

International pressure continued to be exerted by the African Union, which succeeded in having a UN Security Council statement passed condemning the coup. The African Peace and Security Council was given a deadline for the release of Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and his restoration to power. This deadline expired on 6th October.

The American Secretary of State announced the imposition of sanctions in the form of a ban on entry visas to the US for persons who had "obstructed the restoration of the constitutional order". According to the American Embassy in Nouakchott, this applied to members of the Military Council and the government members appointed by them, to MPs who had supported the coup, and to a number of businessmen and other influential figures.

The European Union invited Mauritania's military rulers to hold negotiations with them under a procedure set out in Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement, which regulates partnership relations between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states. Article 96 of the agreement stipulates negotiations if one of its member states commits a breach of democratic principles or human rights. However, in case the issue remains unresolved the agreement stipulates that the dialogue may not last longer than 120 days, and that it should be followed by the imposition of sanctions on the states concerned.

The first round of these negotiations was held in Paris on October 20th 2008 and ended in failure. According to the other side, the Mauritanian delegation had not offered any new proposals for ending the crisis. The EU announced that if the coup's instigators did not release President Ould Cheikh Abdallahi within one month, it would impose economic sanctions on Mauritania.

In many ways the coup of 2008 can be considered different from the previous coups that have been staged in the country since its independence. The experiment with civilian rule did not for any reason warrant the use of force against it, which suggests that the military seized power in order to revoke the decree by which they were dismissed. Moreover, the coup of 2008 does not seem to have been directed against all elements within the political regime but was limited to suspending the institution of the presidency, while all other constitutional institutions were left in place.

The fact that political parties were allowed to continue functioning and that a minimum level of public freedoms was preserved contributed to the emergence of a domestic bloc opposed to the coup. This bloc was initially permitted to express its views through demonstrations, though it was banned from making use of the official media. However, the military later issued an order banning all demonstrations on the pretext of maintaining security.

Furthermore, the few individuals who had been arrested in the aftermath of the coup were released several days later, with the exception of President Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and his First Minister, of whom the latter was first released but subsequently placed under house arrest.

Generally speaking, the coup was not followed by the wave of oppression that usually follows military coups, and each side has continued to make use of the available margins of freedom of expression, leading some foreigners to joke that Mauritians are living democracy in the shadow of the coup.

A Way out of the Deadlock

The road map presented by pro-coup NA members during the extraordinary session of parliament that was held is the only document

that provides an indication of the coup's leaders' political vision. It proposes a number of measures, the most significant of which are a transitional period of twelve to fourteen months and the holding of presidential elections.

The largest opposition parties (the DFB) boycotted the session during which this document was approved, on the grounds that its demand for the insertion of a clause that would forbid the members of the High Council of State from standing in the presidential elections had not been met.

The anti-coup bloc refused to recognize the extraordinary session, and following the publication of the road map, declared its rejection of the document *in toto*. It also proclaimed its loyalty to whom it considered to be the legitimate president and insisted on a return to the pre-August 5th state of affairs.

Messaoud Ould Belkheir announced an initiative to reinstate temporarily President Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in order to oversee the organization of presidential elections, and to form a ruling council that would include the leaders of the houses of parliament and a number of other high standing figures, in addition to representatives of the military. The council members would be commissioned with formulating a plan for how to avoid a repetition of the same events, and with considering future relations between the army and other state authorities.

Several proposals were made at the international level. The most significant, made by the EU ambassadors, stipulates a solution that is based on the provisions of the Mauritanian constitution. According to this proposal, the Senate President would assume the presidency for a period of 45 days, during which presidential elections would be held. However, one obstacle facing this proposition is the fact that the president's position can only

be filled in the case of his death or resignation, or in the case of an impediment preventing him from carrying out his functions. Moreover, for the president to resign he must first be restored to his position, an eventuality that was firmly rejected by the military and its political supporters, both of whom considered it a “red line” that could not be crossed.

Assuming one agrees that this crisis represents a conflict between elites who have yet to reach political maturity, (which only serves to emphasize the personal rivalries at play in this conflict), there can be no fundamental solution to this problem. The army will realize that its role in politics is over, that the world is no longer willing simply to tolerate military coups, and that the use of force outside the legitimate political framework is ethically and legally difficult to justify.

If the coup’s instigators succeed in containing the wave of domestic and internal opposition to their rule, it is highly likely that one of the army generals may run for presidential elections. If he wins, this would allow him to exchange his military uniform for civilian garb and to remain in power - until Mauritians wake up one morning to witness the tenth coup d’état.