

Mauritania on track

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On Sunday, Mauritians voted into power Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in a historic presidential election, widely praised as free and legitimate by international observers. Sunday's run-off election, coming on the heels of the inconclusive 11 May first round poll, pitted Abdallahi against opposition leader Ahmed Ould Daddah, head of the Rally of Democratic Forces Party. With 52.85 per cent of votes, compared to Daddah's 47.15 per cent, Abdallahi confirmed predictions that the powerful coalition he had built in the run-up to the second round election would help him prevail. Both Zeine Ould Zeidane and Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, the third and fourth place winners of the first poll, respectively, joined Abdallahi's camp after the first election.

Continuing a trend of high voter turnout in the newly democratic state, Sunday's election saw 67 per cent of eligible voters casting ballots, only slightly lower than the 70 per cent recorded in the first round.

Abdallahi, who will be sworn into office on 19 April, will have to make good on promises to Mauritians of a new era of national unity, good governance, and economic growth. Despite the discovery of sizeable offshore oil reserves in 2001, Mauritania remains one of the world's poorest and least developed countries. In their campaigns, both Abdallahi and Daddah promised new efforts to alleviate poverty, with Abdallahi stressing the need for macro-economic development and further exploration of Mauritania's natural resources and Daddah calling for a more equitable distribution of the country's wealth.

Both campaigns also focussed on the need to address Mauritania's history of human rights violations and ethnic tensions, and promised an immediate resolution to the country's refugee crisis. Thousands of Afro-Mauritanian exiles have been unable to return to the country after being forced out during violent race riots in 1989. Also guaranteed were tougher measures to combat the practice of slavery, which, despite being outlawed in 1981, is still widespread throughout the country.

For many, the principal difference separating the two candidates was the perceived association of Abdallahi with the former regime of Maaouiya Ould Taya and the current military government of Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall. Daddah, on the other hand, built a reputation for himself as a staunch Taya critic, suffering arrest numerous times under the Taya regime for his political activities.

As one Nouakchott human rights activist said, deciding between Abdallahi and Daddah essentially boiled down to "a debate between continuity of the system and change."

While the extent to which Abdallahi will differentiate himself from former ruling elites remains to be seen, Mauritania's official transition to democracy has given many hope that real reform may now become possible in the largely desert country and that its experiment in democratic rule will serve as an example to the rest of the region.

According to Beshir Al-Hassen, a prominent businessman in Nouakchott and president of Le Pacte Republicain, a group responsible for organising the sole debate between the candidates' spokespersons before the 11 May poll, "the elections present promising prospects for Mauritania to build an open and dynamic democratic system, to strengthen its national economy and to fight all social and societal exclusions. Equally important is the message to other Arab and African countries to unlock their doors to democratisation and social reforms."