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## Mauritania's new president must 'prove independence'

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By Agence France Presse (AFP)

NOUAKCHOTT: The winner of Mauritania's first democratic presidential vote faces huge hurdles in righting the country's recent slave history, boosting living standards and proving his independence from the exiting junta, observers said Tuesday. Sidi Ould Sheikh Abdullahi, a former political prisoner who won a second and final election round on Sunday, most urgently needs to "prove that he is independent and will respect his promises," said Mohammad Fall Ould Oumer, an editorialist with independent daily La Tribune.

The 69-year-old former government minister, who is set to become Mauritania's first democratically elected president since the country won independence from France in 1960, has vowed to establish the rule of law after decades of dictatorship and military rule.

He has also pledged to cement national unity in Mauritania, a multi-ethnic country still struggling with its history of slavery, which was only officially abolished in 1981 but which many claim continues virtually unabated to this day.

During his campaign, Abdullahi vowed that remaining cases of slavery would be "severely punished," and that former slaves and their decedents would benefit from "positive discrimination." With his adversaries maintaining that his candidacy was backed by the military junta that ousted long-time dictator Maaouya Ould Taya two years ago, Abdullahi will especially need to prove his autonomy, Oumer said.

"He must also urgently ensure that the army is removed far from the political field and solve the questions of human rights, and energetically start reforging the foundations of the united state," the editorialist said.

Economist Ahmad Ould Dah meanwhile said that Abdullah's main challenge will be improving the standard of living, which "is deteriorating every day despite incontestable macro-economic results." One out of two of the country's 3.1 million inhabitants live under the poverty line, despite the opening of offshore oil fields a year ago. - **AFP**