



MAURITANIA: THE MILITARY'S PRESENCE IN 'DEMOCRACY'

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INTRODUCTION:

Report At A Glance

The 2019 presidential elections in Mauritania were an occasion for the Brussels International Center's (BIC) North Africa department to focus on a country that is rarely considered in geo-political studies. We attempted to understand the country's history and present; from its independence in 1960, to the latest elections in 2019.

We collected information in Arabic, English and French, and conducted interviews with Mauritanian and non-Mauritanian experts, journalists, and professors as to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the country's political and social construction.

We then decided to organize the paper into two chapters: the first is a historical review of the country's milestones from independence to 2019. What we observed is that Mauritania's political pace has been rhythmized by successive coups d'état, creating both instability and an impossibility for civilian rule to be entrenched: Mauritania

has witnessed five coups or attempts of coups since Moktar Ould Daddah was overthrown in 1978.

This instability has led to a *de facto* constant military rule, through which democratic promises are successively deceived. This also led to a worsening representativity of Mauritania's non-Arab communities. We analyzed the concept of "personal transition", whereby the military junta maintains itself in power by organizing seemingly democratic elections and presenting, or backing, a military candidate that is systematically elected or re-elected.

The second chapter, pertaining to the 2019 elections, traced the multiple deficiencies that the campaigning and voting processes have witnessed. Although these elections raised unprecedented hopes for a true democratic transition, and albeit the fact that some candidates including the anti-slavery figure Biram Ould Dah Abeid gathered a genuine dynamic around their programs, the military-backed candidate, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, won from the first round of the elections. Ergo, the latest ballot failed to put an end to

the military’s involvement in politics in Mauritania.

Most international observers, including from the European Union, were prevented from monitoring the process. Prior to the ballot the opposition threatened to boycott the elections, having denounced the non-independent nature of the electoral commission. Then it vehemently contested the results, filing a recourse before the Constitutional Council for voting fraud. Despite this, the results were instantly validated by the Council.

Moreover, and considering the important ethnic and social divisions in Mauritania, the newly-elected president eluded important social issues

including that of national languages. This was despite the fact that most of the opposition prioritized it. And to many, this suggests Ghazouani’s election signals the continuation of the systemic disenfranchisement of the country’s black communities.

We concluded that Mauritania could improve the representativity and transparency of its political system through measures aiming at utterly transferring power to civilians, ensuring political plurality within its electoral commission as to guarantee fair elections, and addressing the historical discrimination against its non-Arab communities.

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A POLITICAL TIMELINE OF MAURITANIA: FROM INDEPENDENCE TO THE 2019 ELECTIONS

1960	Mauritania obtained its independence from France.
1965	The single-party system is institutionalized through the Party of Mauritanian People (PPM).
1978	Moktar Ould Daddah is ousted in a military coup d'état.
1978 - 1992	A military council rules Mauritania.
1984	Colonel Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya stages a successful coup against colonel Haidalla.
1987	Non-Arab officers attempt prepare a coup plot. President Taya proceeds to purge the military from non-Arabs.
1991	A new constitution is approved by referendum, consecrating multi-partyism.
1992 - 2005	Ould Taya is president of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, having been reelected in 1997 and 2003.
2003	A failed bloody coup is attempted led by Nasserist officers from the Oulad Nacer and Laghlaï tribes. ¹
2005	Colonel Ould Abdel Aziz (commander of the presidential security battalion/BASEP) and his cousin (director of National Security) oust Taya in a coup d'état. The Military Council for Justice and Democracy momentarily assumes power, headed by colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall.
2007	The first democratic presidential elections of the country's history are organized. Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi is elected.
2008	President Abdallahi is ousted in a coup d'état. A military State council, headed by general Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, assumes power.
2009	Presidential elections are organized. Abdel Aziz, who lead the 2008 coup d'état, won the elections.
2013	Parliamentary elections are organized.
2014	Presidential elections are organized. The incumbent won the elections from the first round. The opposition boycotted the ballot.
2019	Presidential elections are organized. Ould Ghazouani has been elected from the first round.

¹ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/58817/archives-thematique/les-secrets-d-un-putsch-manqu/>

2019 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE PROFILES

Name of the Candidate	Party	Position	Support	Popular votes
Mohamed Ould Ghazouani	Union Pour la République, parti au pouvoir	Former Mauritania Minister of Defence	President Aziz Massoud Ould Balkheir Former Prime Minister – Moulaye Ould Mohamed Laghdaf	52,01%
Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid	Independent	Opposition MP and anti-slavery candidate Was imprisoned for five months on charges of “threatening” a journalist Candidate for the second time	Touche Pas à Ma Nationalité SAWAB political party	18,58%
Sidi Mohamed Ould Bou-bacar	Rassemblement National pour la Réforme et le Développement (RNRD)	Former head of the transition government Former diplomats	Islamist Party Tawassoul	17,87%
Baba Hamidou Kane	CVE (Coalition “Vivre Ensemble”)	Journalist	Front Populaire Chbih Cheikh Mélainine	8,71%
Mohamed Ould Mouloud	UFD (Union des Forces du Progrès)	Leader of the Party	Coalition des Forces du Changement Démocratique	2,44%
Mohamed Lemine El-Mourteji El-Wavi	Independent	Financial expert and senior official at the Mauritanian Treasury		0,40%

CHAPTER I: MAURITANIA'S HISTORICAL PATHWAY

The construction of modern Mauritania is intrinsically linked to the fate of Moktar Ould Daddah, the country's first president as an independent State. Although this is a common observation for African States, it is particularly accurate in our case. As in most post-decolonization countries, independence was embodied by a charismatic leader incarnating the people's aspirations for freedom.

Although Mauritania's borders were artificially delineated, colonialism forced disparate populations to evolve and define themselves under a unique colonial framework. Ergo, the rare assets of this newly decolonized country were, paradoxically, the administrative legacy of colonialism and the legitimacy conferred to liberation movements by the international community.

The French colonization of Mauritania was superficial and came at a late stage. The colonized territory was negatively determined. It was mainly intended to fill a void between the west African colonies, and Morocco and Algeria. Beforehand, France consulted with Spain, the colonizing power at the time that exerted a more theoretical than effective control over the territory. The main objective was straightforward: pacify the south of the Maghreb and avoid another colonial power's interference.

Before becoming known as Mauritania, the territory was long identified as "Shinqit", in the Adrar region recognized in West and North Africa as one of the seven Islamic saint cities. The community was relatively homogeneous as a shared language, religion and lifestyle formed the basis of the pre-independence claim of a common cultural identity. However, the Mauritanian society was mainly characterized by struggles between groups of tribes, between tribes internally, and among

tribes' factions. The political organization hinged on the model of "emirates" although these were pale copies of the original Arab emirates. They lacked effective power, were subjected to constant contestations, and were economically dependent to their associates, rivals, and Marabouts².

Mauritania was the last military colony conquered by France. The administrative and political control of the territory took place through a federal logic. Hence, the successive common regimes to French colonies in West Africa have all been applied to Mauritania. These regimes were naturally the product of power-balance considerations far removed from Mauritania's reality. Thus, it is not so much the internal evolution of Mauritania that has contributed to the transformation of its political and administrative structures as the succession of formulas applied to it. The status of colony, then that of independence – including the French Union and internal autonomy – forced Mauritians, after having been lengthily isolated from modern political values, to react and slip into the molds proposed by the colonizing power.

In the 1950s, France witnessed an acute political crisis that resulted in the fall of the Fourth Republic and the advent of the Fifth Republic. A new regime, the *Communauté*, allowed overseas territories to vote through a referendum either for immediate independence, or for the status of an autonomous State as part of the *Communauté*, with the possibility of a national constitution. The *Communauté* was imagined to be a quasi-federal organization, similar to the British commonwealth. Yet, the idea came too late for the colonized States that were already oriented towards independence. Moreover, African States could not agree on a common internal policy to this regime. Quickly, member States opted for independence and the *Communauté* stopped functioning after 1960.

² A Muslim holy man or hermit, especially in North Africa.

Barely adapted to the 1956 reforms, Mauritians chose independence by a sweeping 94.2%. The Islamic Republic of Mauritania was proclaimed in November 1958. The country's first constitution, drafted by the Constituent Assembly, was promulgated in March 1959 by the governmental council's chairperson, Moktar Ould Daddah. Mauritanian leaders seized an unimaginable opportunity created by the wave of decolonization to shape the political future of a country that had long been isolated. Thus, for the third time in four years, the country's institutions went through transformations due to external factors. What then characterized Mauritania's blank administration had to be reformed in the light of the necessary national construction. The first priority was the creation and implementation of State institutions.

The newly-independent Mauritania obtained a government, headed by a prime minister, accountable before a National Assembly elected by universal suffrage. Similar to the conception of the fifth French Republic, the parliamentary regime was meant to be "rationalized". Legislators' prerogatives were strictly defined, as in article 34 of the French constitution. Thus, the prime minister held an extensive regulatory authority. Besides, there was a constitutional commission imagined as an arbitration body between the assembly and the government. Moreover, the constitution authorized multi-party politics under common-sense conditions: respect of democratic principles, State sovereignty and the unity of the Republic. The differentiation from the French text was intended to offer specific characteristics to Mauritania.³

Following the lengthy reign of Ould Daddah, Mauritania became entangled in an endless series of coups d'état. To understand Mauritania's modern

history is to analyze, and comprehend, the rise to power of the military junta from a weak, depoliticized body to – starting from the first coup d'état in 1978 – a highly influential and power-seeking authority. Ould Daddah made sure to transform the military into a section of his party, the PPM. Yet, until the mid-1970s, Mauritania's military was far from being a consequential political actor. It consisted of less than 3000 men.

Soon after the 1984 coup d'état, personal rivalries along with the profound ethnic, racial, cultural, social and ideological schism that characterized the Mauritanian fabric since its creation, reached military branches. This sudden power surge further contributed to de-professionalizing the military through rendering it a tool in the hands of the president, or military officers themselves. Moreover, under Ould Taya's rule – Mauritania's second president since the independence – other security branches, including the police and intelligence, have been increasingly politicized.⁴

The numbers are illustrative of this militarization phenomenon. Mauritania, a country of roughly 3.5 million inhabitants, has been maintaining one of the highest ratios of individuals enrolled in the military in the region. In comparison to nearly 21.000 Mauritanian military officers in 2008, the neighboring Senegal recorded 15.620 individuals and Mali, 15.150.⁵ According to the Central Intelligence Agency's statistics of the same year, Mauritania spent 3.6% of its GDP on defense in 2006, compared with 1.4% and 1.9% for Senegal and Mali respectively.⁶

1.1. The Establishment of

³ Jean-Louis Balans, "Le Système Politique Mauritanien - Institut de Recherches et d'études Sur Les Mondes Arabes et Musulmans," in *Introduction à La Mauritanie*, 1998, <https://books.openedition.org/iremam/1242?lang=en&fbclid=IwAR2VSdrcDNEpBXYoS6WnFJUrdof7ieSI-JJf4pL7TxK1PUHbV4xfvVf7M>.

⁴ Boubacar N'Diaye, "To 'Midwife' - and Abort - a Democracy:

Mauritania's Transition from Military Rule, 2005-2008," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, no. 1 (2009): 129-52.

⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). 2008. *The Military Balance*. London: Routledge

⁶ CIA Factbook. 2008. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html>>

The Single-Party System: Mauritania's Constitutional Dictatorship

The 1961 Constitution modified that of 1959 in fundamental points. Executive power was put in the hands of the Head of State, any reference to a parliamentary regime disappeared, and jurisdictional prerogatives were unified to benefit the Supreme Court. Yet, perhaps the most prominent constitutional modification occurred in 1965 when article 9 was amended to institutionalize a unique political party. This party was the outcome of a merge of numerous national parties. Hence, the Party of Mauritanian People (PPM) officially became the State party. Correspondingly to other post-independence narratives, this decision was justified by the ruling power in terms of non-readiness of the Mauritanian people for a western-inspired democracy.⁷

Since 1961, Mauritania abandoned the idea of a parliamentary regime, deemed incompatible with the requirements of modern State-building. The constitution consecrated an unbalanced presidential regime that allowed Moktar Ould Daddah to assume most powers. Political life revolved around the President of the Republic. He assumed the prerogatives of both a Head of State in a presidential regime and a Head of Government in a parliamentary regime. In addition, he was the guardian of the constitution, national independence and territorial integrity and was also in charge of the executive power as ministers answered before him as auxiliaries. Additionally, Moktar Ould Daddah held an extensive regulatory authority as the constitution limited the arena of the legislative power. Along the National Assembly, the Head of State had the right to initiate a legislation, a referendum as to adopt important draft

laws, or a prescription as to intervene in the legislative field. Moreover, article 25, heavily drawn from the French constitution, organized what has been qualified⁸ as a constitutional dictatorship as it authorized the president to assume all prerogatives under "exceptional circumstances".⁹

The second centerpiece of the Mauritanian system, the National Assembly, was far from being as important as the President. It was elected for a five-year mandate by universal suffrage. Yet, to limit the risks of multi-partyism, the vote is a first-past-the-post list vote with, neither allowing to combine lists nor preferential voting. These dispositions were maintained after the institutionalization of the PPM in 1965. Additionally, the prerogatives of the Assembly were neither exclusive, nor extensive. Not only did it share the legislative initiative with the Head of State, but its field of intervention in the matter was also limited by the Constitution. Any exceedance of these prerogatives risked to be sanctioned by the Supreme Court which holds a power of constitutional review. The Assembly could sit in ordinary session for a maximum of four months across two sessions, further restricting the possibility of exercising a check-and-balance role. Furthermore, parliamentarians had to examine and vote the budget within significant time constraints, otherwise the President was allowed to promulgate it through prescription on the basis of the precedent year's expenditures.¹⁰

The Assembly's lack of prerogatives was not compensated by a monitoring capacity either. The President of the Republic was simply required to present a message once a year taking stock of the government's activities. On the other hand, the Commission could not set up a committee of inquiry to obtain additional information to those which the Head of the Executive wished to

⁷ Clement H. Moore, "One-Partyism in Mauritania," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 3, no. 3 (October 1965): 409–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X00006194>.

⁸ Balans, "Le Système Politique Mauritanien - Institut de Recherches et d'études Sur Les Mondes Arabes et Musulmans."

⁹ J. C. Arnaud, *Les institutions politiques de la Mauritanie* (École nationale d'administration, 1975).

¹⁰ Balans, "Le Système Politique Mauritanien - Institut de Recherches et d'études Sur Les Mondes Arabes et Musulmans."

provide. This rendered the voting of draft laws a merely symbolic process controlled by the executive.¹¹

Daddah's rule continued until 1976 before being ousted in a bloodless coup in July 1978. A military committee ruled the country from 1978 to 1992.¹² The present constitution was approved by a referendum in 1991, consecrating a multi-party system, a first in Mauritania's history. In the wake of the coup, the emergent leaders of Mauritania ordered the suspension of the constitution as part of denouncing the manipulation of State institutions by the former regime to serve the interests of those who were in power. They promised the installation of a pluralist democracy and the rehabilitation of the National Assembly's prerogatives.¹³

1.2. Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya's Rule: From 1992 To 2005

After the end of the PPM's rule, the Democratic and Social Republican Party (PRDS) – Taya's party – became a hegemonic player in Mauritanian politics in the aftermath of the country's first pluralist elections in 1992, a year after the 1991 constitution had been voted. Taya was the chairman of the military committee that governed the Republic between 1978 and 1992. He won the elections that same year and was reelected in 1997 and 2003.¹⁴

The October 2001 municipal and legislative elections have been considered by observers as a first milestone in Mauritania's path towards eventual democracy. In an effort to circumvent previous accusations of fraud and lack of transparency, the

government undertook safeguard measures such as publishing the list of voters and created voter identification cards that were hard to falsify. Consequently, the elections were not boycotted by the opposition which managed to win fifteen municipal positions and eleven seats in the Assembly. The PRDS, which allied with two other parties, won the majority in both elections.¹⁵ Yet, as the newly elected opposing deputies used their newly-acquired platform to openly challenge Taya's policies, the regime soon banned major political parties and effectively terminated the short democratic parenthesis it had initiated.¹⁶

In 2003, Mauritania organized presidential elections. Some categories of candidates were undoubtedly deemed an unprecedented progress in representing a larger number of Mauritians. Six candidates – including the first female candidate and the first Haratine¹⁷ candidate – represented a fairly diverse political offer.¹⁸ The historical significance of these candidacies is non-negligible.

In this sense, **Diallo Saidou Nourou**, Mauritanian Public Law professor and observer of the 2019 presidential elections, stated to the authors:

“Because of its geographical position and its human composition, the communities that suffer the most from the political system's lack of representativeness are the so-called Haratines and Afro-Mauritians or Blacks (Peuls, Wolofs and Soninkés) for the benefit of the Maure community (Arab-Mauritians). It should also be pointed out the over-representativeness of the Arab-Mauritanian community within the political apparatus actually benefits only two sub-groups within the said community. Thus, political power is mainly vested in the marabouts or warrior tribes.”

¹¹ Balans.

¹² <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/126469/politique/chute-de-moktar-ould-daddah/>

¹³ N'Diaye, “To ‘Midwife’ - and Abort - a Democracy.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Alain Antil, “Élections, innovations politiques et non renouvellement des élites en Afrique: exemples djibouto-mauritaniens,” *Espace Populations Sociétés* 21, no. 3 (2003): 529–

35, <https://doi.org/10.3406/espos.2003.2104>.

¹⁶ Boubacar N'Diaye, “Mauritania's Stalled Democratization,” *Journal of Democracy* 12 (July 1, 2001): 88–95, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2001.0052>.

¹⁷ Former slave.

¹⁸ N'Diaye, “To ‘Midwife’ - and Abort - a Democracy.”

This observation is also shared by the journalist **Nicolas Salvi**:

“Black-Mauritanian communities form the majority of the population yet they are underrepresented within State institutions. Per instance, after the announcement of the 2019 presidential elections’ results and the beginning of the first demonstrations, the government denounced a “foreign hand” that would seek to destabilize the country, by accusing all the countries bordering Mauritania with the exception of Morocco and Algeria. This is part of a structuring narrative since the independence, which does not hesitate to mobilize fears of a “black invasion”. The 1989 events are, in this sense, a painfully illustrative example.¹⁹ “

The 2003 elections took place a few months after a violent failed coup d’état in June of the same year. Incumbent president Maaouya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya was reelected by approximately 67% of votes according to official figures.²⁰ In reality, candidates running against him were merely symbolically opposing his rule.²¹ For instance, the main opposition contender, former military president Ould Haidalla, was arrested twice before and after the results were announced.²²

1.3. The August 2005 Military Coup and the Two-Year Transition

President Taya’s twenty-one-year rule ended through an umpteenth coup, taking advantage from the president’s absence to attend the funeral of Saudi King Fahd to stage the overthrow.²³

¹⁹ In April 1989 violence broke out between communities, stemming from a schism between Arab-Berber and Black African communities. Over the next 2 years the “1989 events” resulted in Mauritania’s deportation of Black African citizens to Senegal and Mali, state-sponsored killings, and the purge of tens of thousands of Black Africans from the military and government and their expulsion (see: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/mauritania-1989-events.htm>).

²⁰ http://www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/047/article_25177.asp

²¹ N’Diaye, “To ‘Midwife’ - and Abort - a Democracy.”

On August 3rd 2005, the Mauritanian military performed a bloodless coup, seizing strategic points in the capital Nouakchott. As usual, the official statement mentioned the need to put an end to an oppressive regime. However no power-transfer to civilians was instantly commenced. In this sense, the director of *Sûreté Nationale*, the national police force, was appointed as the Military Council for Justice and Democracy’s (MCJT) president along sixteen military officers as members. The MCJT was to serve as Mauritania’s interim government, and to prepare for a democratic transition.

Interestingly, Colonel Mohamed Vall was previously perceived as a loyal ally to former president Taya, to the extent he contributed to the coup that brought the latter to power. This betrayal has been interpreted as the sign of wide discontent among military ranks and the local government’s branches regarding president Taya’s ruling. This hypothesis is also reinforced by the popular support to the coup and the absence of civilian resistance to it. Although skeptical at first, the international community ended up *de facto* accepting the coup, especially considering the promise to hold elections within two years.²⁴

In November and December 2006, municipal and parliamentary elections were held, less than a year before Mauritians voted to elect a president.²⁵ Considering the forty-year fraud tradition that has been associated with voting, the junta was poorly equipped to hold truly fair and transparent elections.²⁶

In June 2006, a referendum was organized and the overwhelming majority of voters approved of the modified 1991 constitution. However, significant modifications have been ruled out by the military

²² http://www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/047/article_25177.asp

²³ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2005/08/03/coup-d-etat-militaire-en-mauritanie_677320_3212.html

²⁴ N’Diaye, “To ‘Midwife’ - and Abort - a Democracy.”

²⁵ “La transition politique en Mauritanie: Bilan et perspectives,” Crisis Group, April 24, 2006, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/mauritania/political-transition-mauritania-results-and-prospects-0>.

²⁶ N’Diaye, “To ‘Midwife’ - and Abort - a Democracy.”

junta. The amendments were essentially symbolic as it essentially limited the presidency to a maximum of two terms (article 28), adopted a quinquennium-mandate (article 26), and forbid any future president to simultaneously assume the leadership of a party or a private position (article 27).²⁷

As Boubacar N'Diaye explains in his 2009 article²⁸:

“From the outset of the transition, the CMJD had decided that the sins of the Ould Taya regime stemmed essentially from the absence of presidential term limits in the original constitution. They resisted calls to revisit other aspects of the political arrangement.”

One undeniable *acquis* of the 2006 parliamentary elections is the constitution of the most politically diverse National Assembly in the country's history, along a popular enthusiasm towards the voting process illustrated by around 70% of participation in both rounds.²⁹ Concretely, around sixty political parties and independent candidates entered the Assembly.³⁰ The latter category deserves further scrutiny, winning forty-one seats out of ninety-five³¹, more than the opposition's coalition, as these so-called independents were actually strongly affiliated with the former regime. However, most of them refused to openly declare their affiliation with the Republican Party for Democracy and Renewal (PRDR), the legacy of the PRDS. Observers have pointed to the hypothesis this might have been the military's strategy to weaken the opposition and maintain the system's candidates in leadership positions. Paired with a divided opposition which only obtained thirty-nine seats, Mauritians were signaled before the presidential elections that a revolutionary change was unlikely to happen.³²

²⁷ “Mauritania: Referendum Results,” *Africa Research Bulletin: Political, Social and Cultural Series* 43, no. 6 (2006): 16677C-16677C, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-825X.2006.00378.x>.

²⁸ N'Diaye, “To ‘Midwife’ - and Abort - a Democracy.”

²⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6440597.stm>

³⁰ http://archive.ipu.org/parline-f/reports/arc/1207_06.htm

³¹ Ibid.

³² N'Diaye, “To ‘Midwife’ - and Abort - a Democracy.”

1.4. The 2007 Presidential Elections and The Advent of The Third Republic: A Turning Point in Mauritania's History

The 11th March 2007 presidential elections are considered as Mauritania's first democratic elections since independence. Marking the transfer of power from the military to civilians, it was the first time the country's president was elected by ballot.³³ Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi became Mauritania's first democratically elected head of State.³⁴

The underlying logic of this change in position from the military as to agree to a power transition is, according to N'Diaye³⁵, the result of a pressuring national and international conjuncture, a conjuncture that did not exist in 1992. Beyond the

(Sia Kambou/AFP, 2019)

usual promising narrative of ensuring a democratic transition, the Military Council for Justice and Democracy (MCJD) formalized – through an ordinance – the promise not to allow any of its members, or the members of its transitional government (all of whom were figures of Taya's regime) to run for elections.

Conflicting with the system of privileges to be maintained and the sensitive topics to address or bury, there was an abruptly-energized opposition to manage, the international community's expectations to meet, the unanimous rejection of military rule, as well as the popular defiance towards the junta to take into consideration. This fundamentally altered national, and perhaps most

³³ <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2007/03/13/01003-20070313ARTFIG90172-mauritanie-second-tour-pour-la-premiere-election-democratique.php>

³⁴ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2007/03/26/elections-en-mauritanie-sidi-ould-cheikh-abdallahi-l-empporterait-avec-53-5-des-voix_887727_3212.html

³⁵ N'Diaye, “To ‘Midwife’ - and Abort - a Democracy.”

importantly, international context compared to the 1990s played a leading role in the MCJD's decision to relinquish power to civilians.³⁶

Despite the CMJD's early pledge not to support any candidate, and considering the historical novelty allowing Mauritians to choose between candidates who were neither the incumbent nor officially-backed by the regime, the 2007 presidential elections risked to be altered, or even completely annulled at the last minute. One of the main reasons was the uncertainty, and the absence of a clear majority that emerged from the legislative elections. Some parties, which interests were undoubtedly threatened by the process, pushed for the narrative that this would make the country ungovernable and prone to instability.³⁷

Soon, it became clear the military junta was reconsidering its decision to relinquish power yet this

was faced with a unanimous consensus from nearly all political actors to respect the transition's schedule and organize truly democratic elections. This opposition was bolstered by the chairman of the MCJD's failed attempt, two months prior to the elections, to extend the transition period. Colonel Mohamed Vall managed to set the limits of the political debate by forbidding the debate on Mauritania's most pressing issues, notably human rights abuses committed by the former regime, the banalization of ties with Israel, and the country's withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). He also went as far as to introduce the idea of blank ballots, by which if no candidate obtained at least 50% of the votes because of a majority of blank ballots, the elections would be annulled and the transition period, extended.³⁸



³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Daniel Zisenwine, "Mauritania's Democratic Transition: A Regional Model for Political Reform?," *The Journal of North African Studies* 12 (2007),

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13629380701480501>.

³⁸ Zisenwine.

Although deemed non-rigged, the campaign was heavily subjected to tribal dynamics as stakes were high for the political and economic elite. Notably, Ould Taya's tribe, the *Smasside*, along with allies from, the *Ould Bousbaa* tribe (of top military leaders), supported the candidacy of Zeine Ould Zeindane who managed to arrive third in the race with around 15% of votes.³⁹

In an interview with the authors, **Diallo Saidou Nourou** explained that this has been a persistent feature in Mauritanian politics:

"The Mauritanian multiparty system, apart from a few radical left parties, is highly communitarized. This communitarization, unfortunately, circumscribes both the political debate and the political demands within the limits of communitarist demands. Sometimes the claims concern the Arab or non-Arab identity of Mauritania, sometimes they relate only to linguistic, cultural or social issues... And because of this there is a partition of claims and thus, no junction of social demands."

1.5. An Aborted Democratization: The 2008 Coup D'état and The Myth of Military 'Disengagement' From Politics in Mauritania

With the 2007 first "free and fair" presidential elections having succeeded, Mauritania was on a promising path to put its authoritarian, military-led past behind and engage in the lengthy process

of democracy-building. Yet, as the August 2008 coup demonstrated, the military *junta* did not surrender its political ambitions just yet. Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was arrested, along with his prime minister and minister of interior.⁴⁰ The coup, initiated and executed by recently dismissed high-ranking military officials⁴¹, is inscribed in a long African tradition of ambiguous civil-military intersections, and the refusal of the military to refrain from involving in politics.

Claude E. Welch Jr argues that there is a significant contrast between the decisiveness of African military to prepare coups and seize power and their reluctance and self-doubt in relinquishing it to civilians. Ergo, what Welch describes as the model of "personal transition" has been quite prevalent in African politics, whereby a military stepping out of uniform pretexts a popular plebiscite to candidate for presidency and stage seemingly democratic elections.⁴² As noted by Abdoulaye Saine⁴³, the phenomenon of "soldiers turned presidential candidate" did not decrease, even after the relative decline of authoritarianism in the 1990s.

On the 18th July 2009, presidential elections were held. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, the leader of the 2008 coup d'état, won in a familiar scenario. The military junta, under the appellation "the High Council of State", guided the transition period between the coup and the elections.⁴⁴ Abdel Aziz, the Council's president, stepped down a few months prior the elections as to run as a candidate, in accordance with the long tradition of military "personal transition" analyzed by Welch.

Five years later, during the 2014 presidential elections, the same scenario repeated itself. Abdel Aziz

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2008/08/06/coup-d-etat-militaire-en-mauritanie_1080856_3212.html

⁴¹ <https://www.france24.com/en/20080806-president-prime-minister-arrested-apparent-mauritania-coup-soldiers&navi=MONDE>

⁴² Claude E. Welch, "The Dilemmas of Military Withdrawal from Politics: Some Considerations from Tropical Africa | African Studies Review | Cambridge Core," 1974, [https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/african-studies-review/article/div-classtitlethe-dilemmas-of-military-withdrawal-from-politics-some-](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/african-studies-review/article/div-classtitlethe-dilemmas-of-military-withdrawal-from-politics-some-considerations-from-tropical-afri-cadiv/C02E5500D40D6FCD638A918E8116A91D)

[considerations-from-tropical-afri-cadiv/C02E5500D40D6FCD638A918E8116A91D](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/african-studies-review/article/div-classtitlethe-dilemmas-of-military-withdrawal-from-politics-some-considerations-from-tropical-afri-cadiv/C02E5500D40D6FCD638A918E8116A91D).

⁴³ Abdoulaye Saine, "The Soldier-Turned-Presidential Candidate: A Comparison of Flawed 'Democratic' Transitions in Ghana and Gambia," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 28 (December 1, 2000): 191-209.

⁴⁴ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2014/06/23/mauritanie-le-president-abdel-aziz-reelu-avec-plus-de-80-des-voix-sans-opposition_4443226_3212.html

was reelected from the first round with more than 80% of votes. Most of the opposition boycotted the elections as it argued they were rigged.⁴⁵

CHAPTER 2: THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, FACEADE-DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

About 4.5 million Mauritians voted on the 22nd of June for the 2019 presidential elections, with a participation rate of more than 60%⁴⁶ of the electorate and with the inclusion of 435 observers. These presidential elections marked the first hand-over of power between two elected presidents for the country. Since the Constitution does not allow a President to hold more than two mandates, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, former Chief of Staff and Defense Minister, was nominated as the candidate of the ruling party. Ultimately, he was elected President capturing 52% of the popular vote.

A number of countries, including France, Morocco, Algeria, Mali and Saudi Arabia, congratulated President Ghazouani. According to the African electoral mission in Mauritania, no violations were recorded during the first round of elections. However, the electoral mission formulated recommendations as to improve the democratic system in the country.⁴⁷

Despite the positive international praise, no European Union observers were allowed to participate, and inconsistencies in the process contributed to opposition candidates unanimously rejecting the results. Indeed, as former-President Aziz openly supported Ghazouani, a number of commentators denounced an attempt to preserve the existing “military regime.

2.1. The 2019 Presidential Candidates

2.1.1 The Candidates’ Profiles

The electoral campaign started on June 7, two weeks before the elections. A total of six candidates ran for the 2019 presidential elections:

- The aforementioned General Mohamed Ould Ghazouani was the candidate supported by the party in power – Union for the Republic (*Union pour la République* – UPR). He has been the Head of the Directorate General of Public Security (*Direction Générale de la Sûreté Nationale* - DGSN) and Chief of the General Staff of the Mauritanian armed forces since 2008. He was then promoted to Minister of Defence in 2018. Ghazouani has always been a strong and consistent support for President Aziz. He was even the interim president in 2012 when the latter was seeking treatment in France.⁴⁸
- The historian and anti-slavery candidate Biram Ould Dah Abeid was a former presidential candidate during the 2014 elections, coming as the runner-up with 8,67% of votes. For the 2019 elections, he ran as part of the coalition IRA-Sawab. His political platform defends the Haratine community, which has led him twice to prison on charges of “incitement to racial hatred”.⁴⁹
- Another prominent figure of the Mauritanian political landscape is Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar, former head of the transition government. He was supported by the

⁴⁵ <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mauritania-election/mauritanian-president-abdel-aziz-easily-re-elected-in-boycotted-vote-idUK-KBN0EX14F20140622>

⁴⁶ <https://ceni.mr/fr/node/77>

⁴⁷ <https://www.sahamedias.net/fr/elections-presidentielles-tout-sest-passe-normalement-selon-la-mission-de-lunion-africaine/>

⁴⁸ https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/mauritanie-qui-pour-succeder-a-mohamed-ould-abdel-aziz-10-06-2019-2318027_3826.php

⁴⁹ Ibid

Islamist Party Tawassoul, the main opposition party, as well as the businessman in exile Mohamed Ould Bouamatou. He was Prime Minister between 1992 and 1996 under President Maaouiya Ould Ahmed Tayaa and was also the Mauritanian Ambassador to France, Spain and Egypt. Bou-bacar's two main axes during the campaign were the organization of State institutions and poverty.⁵⁰

- Under the coalition *Vivre Ensemble*, the journalist Baba Hamidou Kane defended the black-African Mauritanian population. He ran during the 2009 presidential elections, during which he obtained 1.49% of the popular vote. Before joining the opposition, he also worked for former President Maaouiya Ould Ahmed Tayaa as the Adviser for Presidential Communication.⁵¹
- Mohamed Ould Mouloud was supported by the *Coalition des Forces du Changement Démocratique* (CFDC) and the leader of the UFP (*Union des Forces du Progrès*), and is considered a Marxist candidate.⁵² Part of his platform accused the authorities of selling national mining resources at low prices in an agreement between the National Industrial and Mining Company (SNIM) and the Australian mining company, BCM International Group.
- Finally, the independent candidate Mohamed Lemine El-Mourteji El-Wavi was a political newcomer. He is a financial expert and senior official at the Mauritanian Treasury, and his program was made of 99 points covering every sector, including the allocation of national resources.

Out of the six candidates, the first five candidates are well-known figures of the Mauritanian political system. However, one of these candidates – Mohamed Ould Ghazouani – benefited from large media coverage and support from elected officials, thus being the frontrunner candidate even before the start of the political campaign.

2.1.2 The Candidates' Programs

The elections provided opportunity for candidates to express a particular political program and vision, which is especially noticeable in their policies regarding education and diversity. As Mauritania is a country composed of several communities, this is crucial. Some of these groups have been largely ignored or under-represented in the political system. Thus, these presidential elections were an opportunity not only to achieve a democratic transition but also unity and better political representation.

As a preliminary observation, no television debate between the candidates was scheduled⁵³, which could have been an opportunity for the citizens to have a more precise idea of their programmes and for what they precisely stood for.

The candidate's programs can be summarized as follows:

- Ghazouani advocated for a decent life for all Mauritanian citizens, especially regarding education and health.⁵⁴ He described cultural and ethnic diversity as a source of wealth for the country, and proposed to promote citizenship and diversity with the creation of a new agency. This would be endowed for the first five years with 200 billion ouguiyas (around 5 million euros)

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-4852511>

⁵⁴ <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20190619-presidentielle-mauritanie-pa-roles-candidats>

and would be tasked with eradicating all social disparities and inequalities.⁵⁵

- Abeid made the fight for anti-slavery and the recognition of all social groups at the heart of his political campaign. He proposed to create a police unit specialized in the repression of slavery, and a truth and reconciliation commission to definitively tackle humanitarian liabilities in a fair and dignified manner.⁵⁶ Another key aspect of Abeid's programme was the fight against corruption and fraud in order to make the State more accountable and representative of all the communities in Mauritania.
- Boubacar advocated for an administration that serves the citizens and not a certain political party by promoting a form of governance based on merit and a fair management of public resources. He also urged to fight corruption by ending clientelism. He argued the electoral process is deficient since the government refused to invite international observers – the latter being an important guarantee for transparency and neutrality in the electoral process.⁵⁷
- Hamidou Baba proposed to organize national conventions. He advocated for a modernization of the State with a more equitable sharing of power and wealth. One of his major suggestions was regarding youth employment, as he proposed to create 50,000 jobs per year and special banks for the most vulnerable. As for the army, he believed the security sector should be depoliticized and that the army should focus on its basic tasks: the defense of the territory and the fight against terrorism.⁵⁸

- Mouloud also focused on the preservation of national unity. He recommended undertaking urgent measures to assist the most vulnerable, mainly by reducing the price of staple foods and increasing the salaries of the State's civil servants and agents. Moreover, he claimed there is a need for a new approach to the political system and to security, which should be more democratic.⁵⁹
- El-Wavi campaigned for national unity through a reform of the education system by remarking that public schools are mainly reserved for the most economically-disadvantaged groups of society, and are almost entirely composed of one ethnic group. He promoted the teaching of national languages between 4 and 6 years old (Arabic, French, Wolof, Soninké and Pulaar). He also called for further cooperation with developed countries such as France, the United States of America, as well as the G5⁶⁰.

Proposals regarding national languages also featured for all other candidates except Ghazouani. However, **Saidou Wane** believes these proposals have been insufficient as to guarantee greater representation for Mauritania's disenfranchised communities.

"The representativeness question is parallel to that of "national languages". Only Arabic is recognized as the country's official language according to the Mauritanian Constitution. The others (Soninké, Pulaar, Wolof) are recognized by the Constitution, but do not have the same status as Arabic. This inequality between the country's languages also seems to be reflected in the different communities' representativeness. During the elections, the issue of "national languages" was central to the programs of all candidates. Yet, Ghazouani, the

⁵⁵ http://ghazouani2019.net/IMG/pdf/p-gha_fr-52p_fnal.pdf

⁵⁶ <http://biramdahabeid.org/programme-presidentiel>

⁵⁷ <http://lecalame.info/?q=node/8837>

⁵⁸ <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20190619-presidentielle-mauritanie->

[paroles-candidats](#)

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

president-elect, did not mention it once in his program. In other words, the question of representativeness is a priority for the opposition, whereas the ruling power remains deaf to its prominence.”

2.2. The Election Aftermath

In early June, a poll on voting intentions indicated that the opposition candidate Boubacar was in the lead with 51% of respondents indicating he was their preferred choice.⁶¹ However, following the first round of votes, Ghazouani obtained 52% of the vote, meaning that no second round would be held. Due to the discrepancy between the figures of some of the polls and the actual result, the opposition candidates immediately denounced a coup d'état and requested the publication of the results of each polling station.

In a press release⁶², the National Independent Electoral Commission (*Commission Électorale Nationale Indépendante* – CENI) admitted that the electoral campaign had been peaceful but that financial means were unequally allocated between candidates. More specifically, the candidate of the ruling party, Ghazouani, was given more money, making his campaign more visible. The Commission added that some issues hampered the efficiency of the electoral process, including an insufficient training of polling station officials and candidates' representatives; the delay of operations due to the practice of distributing voter cards on election day; and changes in the location of polling stations at the last moment in the absence of a reliable information system for voters. However, according to the CENI, these issues are unlikely to have affected the sincerity of the voting process. Additionally, the Mauritanian Constitutional

Council validated the victory of Ghazouani in the first round.

As before, the elections' outcome was rejected by the opposition, which called for demonstrations and accused the power of imposing a “state of siege” to create tension between communities.⁶³ In the aftermath of the result publication, Mauritanian authorities shut down the Internet shortly after the start of demonstrations against the results. This act was firmly condemned by Reporters Without borders (*Reporters Sans Frontières*). They argued that the Internet shutdown aimed at preventing access to information that seriously discredited the electoral process and the government's claim to guarantee freedom of press⁶⁴

Furthermore, after the publication of results the headquarters of four opposition candidates were shut down by the police. The army was also deployed in some neighbourhoods and suburbs of Nouakchott and any further demonstrations were banned.⁶⁵ A hundred “foreigners” were arrested during the demonstrations and the ambassadors of Senegal, Mali and Gambia were summoned by Mauritania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ministry enjoined them to ask their nationals to refrain from participating in protests that disturb public order in Mauritania.⁶⁶

2.3. Systemic Weaknesses

Many electoral deficiencies have been noted during these elections, including the structure of the CENI, the system of sponsorships and the lack of representativeness of the opposition.

⁶¹ <http://www.lauthentic.info/Medias/article/Presidentielle-2019-Und sondage-alakhtar-sur-les-intentions-de-vote-place-Ould>

⁶² <https://ceni.mr/fr/node/77>

⁶³ <https://www.france24.com/fr/20190626-presidentielle-mauritanie-opposition-denonce-etat-siege>

⁶⁴ <https://rsf.org/fr/actualites/mauritanie-rsf-demande-le-retablissement-dinternet>

⁶⁵ <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Afrique/En-Mauritanie-lelection-president-nouveau-coup-dEtat-lopposition-2019-06-26-1201031601>

⁶⁶ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/06/26/mauritanie-une-centaine-d-etrangers-arretes-internet-coupe_5481440_3212.html



(Reuters, 2019)

2.3.1 The CENI

The CENI's structure has been one of the main weaknesses of the current electoral system. It was established in 2012. Previously under the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior, the mission of the CENI was to organize elections.

2.3.1.1. The Structure of the CENI in 2019

Under the current system, it is now the CENI that has to organize the counting process inside polling stations. Each station is chaired by a president and supported by two deputy presidents – the latter two being appointed by the CENI. The counting of votes starts as soon as the polling station closes and must not be interrupted until its completion. The counting processes' minutes must be reported instantly at the polling station at the end of the process and have to include: the number of registered voters, the number of actual voters, the number of nullified votes, the number of ballots cast, the number of blank votes, the number of

votes obtained by each candidate or list of candidates, all claims made by a list of candidates, and all the decisions taken during the voting process.⁶⁷

Once the results are compiled, the polling station's members must countersign the minutes, unless they refuse. In the latter case, the reasons behind their refusal must be specified in the minutes. For the presidential elections, the minutes are then sent in copies to the Constitutional Court, the CENI, the Ministry of Interior, the *Wilayas* and the *Moughataas*⁶⁸. These copies are also issued by the polling station to the representatives of candidates or lists of candidates. A copy is also posted at the polling station.

In the new system, it is also the CENI that has the mandate to proclaim municipal and legislative elections, as well as the provisional results of the presidential elections. Later on, the Constitutional Court proclaims the final results of the elections.

This system also provides for two types of recourses in case of electoral dispute: the CENI adjudicates in case of an administrative recourse while

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid

the Constitutional Court handles legal recourses. A recourse can be made before the CENI during the presidential elections regarding the decisions the latter has taken during the electoral process. These recourses are then included in the minutes of the polling stations or sent to another body.

If a candidate requests the nullification of electoral results, the Constitutional Court has fifteen days starting from the day of the recourse to reach its decision regarding the dispute. However, the main issue is that there is currently no electoral code in Mauritania, but only a collection of electoral laws and regulations which serve as the legal reference for elections.⁶⁹ This crucially calls into question the transparency, inclusivity and clarity of the electoral process.

2.3.1.2. The CENI as an Extension of the Regime

In 2018, Mohamed Vall Ould Bellal was appointed as the head of the CENI. He was strongly in favor of a political consensus during the 2013 municipal and legislative elections, and he was also a member of the National Forum for Democracy and Unity (*Forum National pour la Démocratie et l'Unité* – FNDU), an opposition movement, which contested the structure of the CENI.⁷⁰ This nomination could have been a springboard for the opposition to be represented in the political process, as well as for a restructuration of the contested CENI. Yet, his nomination did not change the current status quo, and the opposition remained committed to contesting the composition of the CENI, arguing the name of the president will not change legal violations. Indeed, in March 2019, a demonstration was organized by opposition activists in front of the the CENI's headquarters in Nouakchott. They requested that the CENI be

replaced by another commission before the presidential elections. Mauritanian security forces quickly broke up demonstrations through the usage of force, pushing them to evacuate⁷¹.

Moreover, during the 2019 presidential elections, the CENI was composed of eleven members who supported candidate Ghazouani. This was largely seen as controversial and led to multiple conflicts between the government and the opposition. Back in 2016, the opposition boycotted the dialogue initiated by the government regarding the CENI. While its participation to the 2019 elections was confirmed, the opposition argued it would not recognize the results if certain reforms were not initiated. It especially required a revision of the electoral register, the presence of international observers and a restructuration of the CENI. A petition for the dissolution of the CENI was even sent to the government, which did not respond.

In an interview with the authors, **Saidou Wane** said:

"It is an open secret that most members of the CENI belong to the presidential movement, or are close to the government. The opposition that sits in the Commission is the one formerly called moderate and open to dialogue. The quasi-homogeneous character of the CENI is not even denied by the government."

In early April 2019, the Electoral Democratic Opposition Alliance (*Alliance Électorale de l'Opposition Démocratique*), a coalition of thirteen parties, threatened to boycott the presidential elections if their request regarding the composition of the CENI was not taken into account. The opposing coalition accused the CENI of openly supporting Ghazouani and thus not being transparent in performing their duties. While the government did not show any willingness to review the

⁶⁹ <https://ceni.mr/fr/node/78>

⁷⁰ <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180720-mauritanie-commission-electorale-change-president>

⁷¹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/mauritanie-une-manifestation-pour-la-dissolution-de-la-commission-électorale-dispersée-1432796>

composition of the CENI, the opposition struggled to unite around a common aim.⁷²

Regarding this issue, **Saidou Nourou** argued:

“The government’s refusal to accept an extension of the CENI’s members to figures proposed by the opposition casts a legitimate suspicion as to its independence from the ruling power. As an independent administrative authority, the appointment of its members must be consensual. Claiming elections are fair and transparent while strong suspicion is casted on the body in charge of the electoral process is counterproductive.”

Candidate Maouloud stated the law provides that the composition of the CENI must be based on a consensus between members of the opposition and the majority. According to him, the CENI is not qualified anymore to conduct “truly credible” elections,⁷³ and hence it should be “restructured”. The coalition already notified the Ministry of Interior about these concerns but the latter argued the electoral law prohibits any amendment to electoral rules, including the restructuration of the CENI, on the eve of an election.

Nevertheless, the Mauritanian government accepted to negotiate with the opposition. The latter aimed to amend the CENI’s rules of procedure and allow more figures to sit in the CENI’s Steering Committee while permitting the opposition candidates to be members of the CENI.⁷⁴

Indeed, an agreement was reached in May 2019 between the opposition and the Ministry of Interior. More specifically, the opposition had to choose three of its members to represent itself in the CENI. However, the Ministry of Interior refused one of them: Ahmedou Wedia, the Islamist Party Tawassoul’s candidate. Nonetheless, Tawassoul disagreed, underlining once again the lack of

consensus between the government and the opposition over the issue of the CENI.⁷⁵

On this, **Saidou Wane** told the authors:

“[The government] has (...) momentarily accepted, prior to the campaign, the idea of a recomposition within the CENI through introducing three representatives proposed by the four opposing candidates. This never materialized as the government did not accept the names proposed by the opposition. The escalation began with the refusal for the journalist and human rights activist Ahmedou Waddia to sit at the CENI.”

Nicolas Salvi added:

“Very early, even before the ballot, the opposition raised serious doubts regarding the independence of the CENI, focusing on its insufficient parity. A priori, no opposition candidate faced great difficulties meeting voters and carrying his/her message. Biram Dah Abeid, for example, had the opportunity to deploy a real dynamic around his program. Then the voting process did not witness any turmoil. Yet, it is at the counting level that the CENI’s insufficiencies have been observed. The Commission’s silence when Ghazouani declared himself the winner, although the final figures were not out yet, is deeply problematic. Has the CENI been complicit in the development of this scenario? Or have its members been pressured? Impossible to know. Anyways, it can be said the commission did not respect its mandate.”

2.3.2 The Issue of Required Political Sponsorship

Secondly, a major issue is the system of sponsorship. The current system requires sponsorships from elected officials (mayors and councillors). More specifically, a candidate who wants to run for a presidential election must collect the

⁷² <https://afrique.latribune.fr/politique/2019-03-28/mauritanie-a-l-aproche-de-la-presidentielle-l-opposition-recuse-la-commission-electorale-812317.html>

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20190414-mauritanie-vers-une-modification-reglement-ceni>

⁷⁵ <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20190508-mauritanie-nouvelle-crise-sein-ceni-presidentielle-tawassoul>

signature of one hundred sponsors, namely elected municipal officials, including at least five mayors. These signatures were easily collected by Ghazouani (281 municipal councillors and 46 mayors) and Abeid (122 municipal councillors and 6 mayors), but the system makes it difficult for any newcomer to the political scene to gather such a number of signatures, as it was the case for Hamidou Kane for instance.

Thus, in May 2019, most sponsorships were rejected as some requirements were missing, especially the signature of the mayor or the Minister of Interior⁷⁶. This was strongly criticized by the anti-slavery candidate Abeid.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the six eventual candidates gathered more sponsorships than required and their candidatures were accepted.

2.4. An Impotent Opposition

2.4.1. Deficiencies of the Constitutional Council

Finally, despite the existence of a multi-party system, the 2019 presidential elections demonstrated the opposition have little say in the political process. Firstly, President Aziz openly supported candidate Ghazouani and argued that no second round would be necessary, adding that “If Ghazouani is not elected, the country risks a conflict”.⁷⁸

The very fact that the results of the first round were almost automatically validated by the Constitutional Council, without taking into account the allegations brought before it by the opposition, is a factor that is a worrying indicator of the new regime. Indeed, the Constitutional Council rejected

the legal recourse of the opposition due to a lack of evidence. However, according to its president, Bathia Mamadou Diallo, “the electoral system in Mauritania improved a lot” and “improve[s] after each election”.⁷⁹

On this, **Saidou Wane** indicated that:

“The Constitutional Council’s president, Mr. Diallo Mamadou, stated his institution did not follow-up on the appeals introduced by opposing candidates as, according to him, the gap between contested votes did not exceed 400 offices in the departments. In this sense, he believes Mohamed Cheikh Ould Ghazouani’s victory could not have been challenged. It should be noted the opposition could not cover all polling stations across the country, yet the Constitutional Council owed both candidates and citizens to seriously consider the appeal initiated by the opposition. Finally, the hostile climate the government has created in the aftermath of the election has further mobilized political opposition, human rights defenders and some international organizations such as Reporters Without Borders.”

Saidou Nourou further observed that:

“Questions remain pertaining to the capacity of the Constitutional Council, human-wise and resource-wise, to examine appeals in such a constraint period. Moreover, the 48 hour deadline to file an appeal is extremely short.”

Fatimata Mbaye, a prominent figure of Mauritanian civil society and President of the Mauritanian association of human rights, argued that there is “no hope”, mainly given the historical background of the political system in Mauritania.⁸⁰ According to her, there were many “irregularities” and “vote-buying” during these elections. She added that a vote recount would necessarily lead to a second

⁷⁶ <http://www.lauthentic.info/Politique/article/Mauritanie-Presidentielle-le-systeme-de-parrainage-des-candidats-critique>

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ <http://www.lauthentic.info/Politique/article/Massaoud-Ould-Boulkheir-evoque-un-chantage-du-president-Aziz>

⁷⁹ <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Presidentielle-Mauritanie-candidat-pouvoir-proclame-elu-premier-tour-2019-07-01-1301032610>

⁸⁰ <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Afrique/En-Mauritanie-lelection-president-nouveau-coup-dEtat-lopposition-2019-06-26-1201031601>

round.⁸¹ Nonetheless, these results were warmly welcomed by the European External Action Service, which stated it is “the first constitutional transition between two elected Presidents” marking “an important step for the country”.⁸² According to Regis Marzin, an independent researcher and journalist, the European Union invented an “imaginary “constitutional transition”” and insisted “on “elected Presidents” whereas, as in all dictatorships, the Heads of State are not “democratically” elected.”⁸³

2.4.2 Allegations of Vote Fraud

According to four of the opposition candidates, there was fraud in the polling station, which would invalidate Ghazouani’s victory.⁸⁴ In a press conference,⁸⁵ a week after the elections, El Hadhrami Ould Abdessalam, the national campaign director of Boubacar, explained that “out of nearly 3,800 minutes, 211 polling stations have been identified where fraud cases are clear”. He argued that, although the number of ballots found is 138 and the number of voters as well, Ghazouani received 302 votes. According to his calculations, 6% out of 54,000 votes do not belong to Ghazouani.⁸⁶

In another press conference, Abeid added that “after verification with our technical technicians who worked on 455 polling stations (out of a total of 3,861), candidate Ghazouani could not have more than 41% in stations where he claimed to have won 100% of votes”.⁸⁷ The candidate also added that “all of these offices are located in remote areas, far from any possibility of control, totalling more than 9,800 votes, or 10% of the global vote”.⁸⁸

Saidou Wane commented:

“Allegations of fraud are at the root of the protests as well as the appeals initiated by opposing candidates. For Mauritians who voted abroad, as in France, it was easy to monitor and report irregularities that might happen, which is not necessarily the case in some remote areas of Mauritania. Especially considering not all candidates could appoint representatives in each polling station. The opposition mainly denounces frauds in these remote places. This is precisely the area that could have the role of the Constitutional Council decisive through recount and/or confronting polling stations’ minutes or contested votes. It is at this price that the election of Ghazouani could have been limpid and indisputable. The CENI has published the results of the polling bureau elections, the document is available on its website. But it is precisely this document that the opposition challenges. For the opposition, this document, in which the published election results do not match the expression of the people, is what they called an “electoral hold-up”.”

However, in spite of these allegations, the Constitutional Council validated the results given by the CENI. Regis Marzin argued the outcomes of these elections are not surprising, especially after the military coup of 2008, and this is in spite of the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections, and the 2013 and 2018 legislative elections. Marzin argued the limitation to two mandates gives the illusion of a democracy, “which still does not exist”.⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

As Mauritania is an under-researched country, this analysis provides a rare insight into the domestic issues of it. One of our primary motivations was to

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/64972/statement-spokesperson-elections-mauritania_en

⁸³ <https://mondafrique.com/mauritanie-le-coup-detat-permanent-2/>

⁸⁴ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/796630/politique/presidentielle-en-mauritanie-la-cour-constitutionnelle-valide-la-victoire-de-mohamed-ould-ghazouani/>

⁸⁵ <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20190701-mauritanie-avant-annonce->

resultats-definitifs

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/796630/politique/presidentielle-en-mauritanie-la-cour-constitutionnelle-valide-la-victoire-de-mohamed-ould-ghazouani/>

⁸⁸ <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Presidentielle-Mauritanie-candidat-pouvoir-proclame-elu-premier-tour-2019-07-01-1301032610>

⁸⁹ <https://mondafrique.com/mauritanie-le-coup-detat-permanent-2/>

address the country's past and present challenges, from independence to this year's presidential elections. We intended to provide a comprehensive picture of Mauritania through understanding its political system, and the impact of that system on its social fabric.

Our primary finding is that Mauritania's post-colonial history saw the emergence of a vicious pattern, namely what Regis Marzin qualifies as a state of perpetual coup d'état. The same scenario repeats itself constantly: the president is ousted by a military junta that promises a transfer of power to civilians after a transition period. A new president is appointed or elected, with heavy military involvement in the process and a military-backed candidate.

As to measure the magnitude of this phenomenon, the 2019 presidential elections represented the first time in Mauritania's history that a handover of power occurred between two elected presidents.

Yet, while these elections represented a true opportunity to instigate a democratic tradition in the country, the military-backed candidate Ghazouani won from the first round. This signals the perpetuation of two traits: a democracy of facade controlled by the military junta, and the disenfranchisement of the Black-Mauritanian identity.

Across this paper, we analyzed the false stability that characterizes the Mauritanian regime, based on the hegemonic rule of the military, aborted attempts to transfer power to civilians, and wide inequalities between social and ethnic groups.

While the existence of a multi-party system was meant to install democracy, the newly-elected president, as usual, was already at the heart of the former regime. As Ghazouani was benefiting from an advantageous position under Aziz's rule, and considering the current government is mainly composed of figures from the previous regime,

this puts into question the truthfulness of a genuine democratic transition in Mauritania.

Holding elections does not necessarily equate democratic development, particularly if the opposition is not involved in any major aspect of the decision-making process.

As a result, we conclude that the main deficiency of the Mauritanian political system is a powerless opposition, which in turn implies a lack of representativeness of the countries' multiple communities, along with the unwillingness of the military to depoliticize itself once and for all.

Should Mauritania choose to address these challenges, there are clear areas of improvement possible. The priority should be imposing a clear delimitation between military and civilian rule, primarily through forbidding military officials to engage in politics. The CENI's mandate should also be more transparent, along with a better representation of the opposition within its members. Moreover, the issue of national languages and the representation of Black-Mauritanians should be on the top of the new government's agenda as to alleviate the historical disenfranchisement of the country's non-Arab populations, and in order to guarantee a more egalitarian society.

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.



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