

Mauritania: 2009, Year in Review

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Mauritania suffers simultaneous geopolitical, economic and security challenges that threaten to spill over unless Mediterranean countries and the US help contain them. The country's history of political infighting, civil unrest, military intervention in domestic politics and dire economic conditions are now compounded by the spread of terrorism. Since 2007, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has found fertile ground for recruiting disaffected Mauritania. The country's troubled political atmosphere is ideal for AQIM's ambition. Following its inception, the group began an aggressive campaign to destabilise the country by targeting its infrastructure and international interests.

Neighbouring Mediterranean countries, via the European Union (EU), sent a clear message in recognising Abdul Aziz's illegitimate accession to power, namely, that democracy would be sacrificed for stability. However, these two concepts are neither contrary nor mutually exclusive. International actors should coordinate their actions to help stabilise Mauritania and curb terrorist networks while safeguarding the rudimentary principles of Mauritanian democracy. This paper focuses on Mauritania's political, economic and security developments in 2009.

Politics

The August 2008 Coup and Its Immediate Aftermath

Mauritania's first democratically elected president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdullahi, began to face major obstacles shortly after taking the reins in April 2007. Economic hardship worsened by the increase in commodity prices in 2008, along with pervasive corruption and an increasing number of terrorist attacks, brought growing pressure on the government. The parliamentary majority that supported the president became frustrated with his performance. Political tension peaked in July 2008, when a number of MPs resigned, contesting the government's failed policies. Concurrently, a rift began to grow between President Abdullahi and the top military commanders who backed him after ousting Muaouya Ould Sidi Amed Taya, who had ruled for nearly two decades.

As pressure from the Parliament mounted, Abdullahi's first cabinet resigned, and in May 2008 he appointed a second one in the hopes of allaying popular discontent. But the second cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Yahya Ould Ahmed Al-Waghef, also failed to build a good rapport with the Parliament. In July 2008, President Abdullahi threatened to dissolve the Parliament if it failed to cooperate with the new cabinet. The move reinforced notions that the president was growing too independent, which alienated him from his top military brass. On 6 August 2008, Abdullahi dismissed the country's four most senior military officers.

Within hours of the announcement, the officers, led by General Ould Abdel Aziz, retaliated by seizing control of the palace and declaring President Abdullahi and Prime Minister Waghef unfit to govern – af-

ter only fifteen months in office. Following the coup, the generals set up a “State Council” to govern the country until questions of succession and elections could be resolved. Abdullahi was under house arrest from 6 August 2008 to 21 December 2008. After Abdullahi was deposed, thousands of Mauritians took to the streets to celebrate the new leadership. Some saw it as the best hope of addressing urgent security and economic needs, both of which had been neglected amid the political wrangling. Nonetheless, it appeared that Mauritians had mixed feelings about the coup and political parties were divided over it. Some more sceptical observers predicted that the country would backslide on its first steps towards democracy and feared perpetual military intervention in domestic politics.

The international community took umbrage, quickly and forcefully condemning the coup. Initially, the US, EU and African Union (AU) demanded that the military junta reinstate President Abdullahi. Within days, however, this demand gave way to a vaguer and more moderate request for a “return to constitutional rule.” In response to the coup, the United States immediately suspended its non-humanitarian aid, including Millennium Challenge Corporation grants and security assistance. The AU suspended Mauritania’s membership and extended sanctions. In April, the EU, under French leadership, effectively suspended its aid missions in Mauritania for two years. World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) development projects were also halted. The Arab League was customarily silent on the matter and Mauritania’s neighbours had varying reactions. Algeria remained largely quiet, while Morocco sought to discretely build an early rapport with the new regime. A North African blogger, “The Moor Next Door,” rightly pointed out that Morocco’s friendly overtures to the junta leaders could be interpreted as an effort to secure favour with the new regime. Morocco was never keen on former President Abdullahi’s recognition of the Polisario Front leadership as legitimate representatives of the Western Sahara.

National Dialogue and the Transitional Government

In the months following the coup, junta leader Abdel Aziz spent significant time appealing to disaffected branches of society, promising to pursue national development initiatives, improve standards of living and provide basic commodities. He was dubbed the “president of the poor,” and, despite his internation-

al isolation, he benefited from a timely decrease in global commodity prices. He also began negotiating with international leaders on what a “return to constitutional rule” would have to entail to ensure the flow of foreign assistance once again.

On 5 January 2009, Abdel Aziz unilaterally announced his intention to hold presidential elections on 30 May – with a possible second round tentatively set for 13 June – following days of deliberation during a State Council conference. The anti-junta coalition, known as the National Front for the Defence of Democracy (FNDD from the French) and comprised of four national political parties and the deposed president, did not recognise the agreement. The announcement that the opposition would not participate in the elections increased fears of continued military rule, as the junta leader did not rule out running in the upcoming election.

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At the end of March 2009, General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz announced his candidacy. Opposition leaders including Ahmed Ould Daddah, head of the Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD), contested the legality of Ould Abdel Aziz’s candidacy. Parties opposing the coup, along with former President Abdullahi, threatened to boycott the election. Abdel Aziz retaliated by amending the constitution to allow former military leaders to run for office. He resigned his military post in April 2009. In order to focus his campaign efforts on the poor, he made several trips to poverty-ridden peripheral areas, promising improved standards of living and infrastructure, including hospitals, schools and roads. He also made ample promises to combat corruption and crack down on terrorist networks.

Alarmed by this turn of events, the international community put pressure on both Abdel Aziz and the opposition to come to the negotiating table. Under Senegalese auspices, the two groups began to ne-

gotiate a compromise on the election and a transitional government. Prior mediation efforts led by Libyan president Muammar Qaddafi had failed, as he was largely perceived to favour the coup leader. On 3 June 2009, Ould Abdel Aziz and members of the opposition succumbed to international pressure and reached a deal in Dakar to postpone the elections until 18 July; a national unity government would take over during the transition.

The transitional government comprised 26 ministerial posts shared between the supporters of the junta and the opposition. As per the agreement, the deposed president officially stepped down, giving up any claims to the presidency, and signed a formal decree appointing the transitional government. The international community's initial tacit approval of the agreement would later transform into praise for the junta's compromises, which accordingly reflected an earnest desire to restore democracy. The opposition, including Ould Daddah's RFD and the four-party FNDD coalition, though still nervous, agreed to participate in the upcoming election.

Moulay Ould Mohamed Laghdaf, who was appointed Prime Minister by Abdel Aziz a few days after the coup, remained prime minister of the transitional government and half the 26 seats in the government remained unchanged; the other half was distributed among the opposition groups. Ba Mamadou Mbare, leader of the Senate, was appointed interim president.

Presidential Election

It was clear early on that Abdul Aziz was poised to win the election. The question was mostly how close the race would be. Among those running was the speaker of the National Assembly, Masoud Ould Belkheir; Ahmed Ould Daddah, president of the RDF; and Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, independent and leader of the 2005 coup. Other less known candidates included Hamdi Ould Meimou and Sarr Ibrahim Moctar, a former contender in the 2007 presidential elections. In total, there were ten candidates, with one withdrawing a few days before the vote.

One month before the election, hasty preparations began, including the creation of an independent administrative body, the National Independent Election Commission, to administer the election. The AU, Arab League, International Organisation of the Francophonie and Organisation of the Islamic Conference sent observers to monitor the election. The US and EU refrained from sending observers.

National polls predicted a tight race between the three favourites: Abdel Aziz and the opposition leaders, Ould Dadah and Ould Belkheir. Abdel Aziz won with 52.6% of the vote, according to the Ministry of Interior's final results. Ould Belkheir was a distant second with only 16.2%, and Ould Daddah was third with 13.6%. Opposition leaders denounced the results of the election and contested them on the basis of fraud, claiming voter improprieties and ballot manipulation. International observers declared the elections largely fair; and the opposition's allegations were soon dismissed. Abdel Aziz took office on 5 August 2009 in a national swearing-in ceremony attended by several foreign dignitaries from the AU and the Arab League, including neighbouring countries.

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The AU welcomed the results of the election and hailed it as a restoration of democracy. It lifted sanctions as soon as the Dakar deal was reached, before the elections. As early as September 2009, Mauritania was being accepted back into the international community. NATO resumed its security programmes with Mauritania in September 2009. The EU determined, after a visit to Mauritania in October, that the country had indeed returned to constitutional rule and promised to lift sanctions, restore ties and, more importantly, resume its assistance projects. Perhaps more concerned with Mauritania's apparently tough stand on terrorism than its electoral propriety, EU nations re-engaged in December 2009. The World Bank and IMF also resumed their programmes there in September, 2009.

Since taking office, Abdel Aziz's government has tried to focus on terrorism issues. Recently the government passed anti-terrorism legislation that extends more power to the government to access and monitor individuals suspected of terrorist activity. Under the new law, terrorism cases will be adjudicated in special courts. The government also announced a plan to revamp the military and security services in order

to combat terrorism and intercept acts of banditry (drug trafficking, etc).

Terrorism and security

Islamist extremism in Mauritania has been a growing concern for several years. Recently there have been a number of significant terrorist attacks attributed to Islamist extremists and the regional organisation AQIM. These have included the June 2005 attack on a Mauritanian military outpost at Lemgheiti, the December 2007 murder of four French nationals at Aleg and an attack against Mauritanian soldiers at El Ghal-laouiya, also in December 2007. These incidents were followed by several others in 2008, including the February assault on the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott, an April gun battle, also in the capital, and a September ambush of Mauritanian soldiers near Tourine. AQIM and senior al-Qaeda leaders have discussed Mauritania in statements on several occasions, with al-Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahri, in February 2007, calling on Muslims in Mauritania to rise up against a "treasonous" government.

Over the course of 2009, there were three terrorist attacks in Mauritania. The first occurred on 23 June 2009, when an American citizen was gunned down in Nouakchott. Christopher Logest was working as a teacher in Mauritania when he was killed by suspected extremists. The Logest killing was followed by the 8 August suicide bombing outside the French embassy in Nouakchott. Only three people were injured in the attack, which has come to be considered Mauritania's first suicide bombing.

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These attacks were followed by the 29 November abduction of three Spanish nationals working in the

country as aid workers, as they travelled on the road from Nouakchott to Nouadhibou. AQIM claimed responsibility for the kidnapping and the Spaniards were subsequently moved to neighbouring Mali. As of this writing, media reports suggest that the Spanish government was negotiating the release of its nationals. The negotiations have reportedly focused on money, after the kidnappers dropped their initial demands for the release of militants held in Spanish custody. While Islamist extremism is a growing concern in Mauritania and throughout the Sahel, many analysts caution that the issue must be kept in the proper perspective. Extremism in Mauritania is not endemic, and while Mauritanian nationals have been recruited into AQIM, at present there appears to be only a limited support structure in the country. Conditions in the region, including weak central governments, vast under-governed spaces, transnational criminal activity, and chronic economic and governance challenges, must be addressed if terrorism is to be combated intelligently.

Economy

With about half of its population living in poverty, Mauritania's economy faced many challenges before and after the August 2008 coup. The country relies heavily on agriculture, fisheries and extractive industries (iron ore, copper and gold). In 2006, oil was discovered in Mauritania and the country still hopes to capitalise on the promise of energy production. However, the potential of Mauritania's oil fields is still in question.

Economic Reforms

Abdel Aziz's government vowed to tackle three main economic challenges: reducing poverty, combating corruption and improving the business climate. However, according to the World Bank's *Doing Business Report*, Mauritania made no significant reforms in the last year, and the business climate worsened, slipping from 161 in 2008 to 166 in 2009 out of 181 countries. Furthermore, Mauritania ranks among the most corrupt nations in Transparency International's corruption perception index (in 2008, it ranked 115 out of 180 nations, falling to 130 in 2009).

A commitment to World Bank and IMF funding is likely to improve the country's economic climate. In terms of spending, according to the Economist Intel-

ligence Unit (EIU) report for October 2009, oil subsidies are likely to increase along with military spending and public projects. The report voices scepticism about the government's commitment to combating corruption, claiming that the process is likely to be "selective." However, according to a December 2009 report in the French weekly *Jeune Afrique*, since taking office the president has targeted several high-ranking officials suspected of fraud or corruption. These included the director of budget, the head of the National Social Security Fund and officials from the Ministry of Rural Development, in addition to the prefect of the capital, Nouakchott.

Economic Realities and Outlook

Internal political instability and a global economic downturn contributed to a decline in foreign direct investment, which stood at approximately \$103 million in 2008 (compared to \$154 million in 2007) according to the EIU report. However, with a return of foreign assistance funds and increased oil exploration, the country's economic outlook is set to improve for 2010. While real GDP growth declined from 3.5% in 2008 to 1.5% in 2009, the rate is expected to reach 3% in 2010, although this barely keeps up with the birth rate. The IMF resumed its \$80 million programme to support the public finance sector and enhance the performance of the energy sector in September 2009. It also pledged additional funds in the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility programme in 2010. World Bank programmes, entailing an estimated total of \$1.4 billion allocated to about 17 support and infrastructure development programmes, also resumed in September 2009. Funding from international donors, including the EU, is expected to increase in 2010. According to the Spanish news agency EFE, in September 2009, Spain granted Mauritania a loan of €3.5 million to build an electricity network likely to improve agricultural performance in the area around the Senegal River.

Extractive Industries

The government is also keen on increasing revenues from extractive industries. Several news agencies reported government contracts, including a deal with

Tasiast Mauritania Limited, a subsidiary of Vancouver-based Red Back Mining, to increase gold extraction. Other reports included one that the Canadian SNC-Lavalin engineering company had signed a deal with Mauritania to provide construction and engineering services to an iron ore project near the northern town of Zuerate. The project is expected to increase iron ore output. *Mining Weekly* also reported that the Australian company, Forte Energy, which already holds several exploration licences in Mauritania, is set to expand its uranium exploration project starting in February 2010. Oil output has not reached the desired capacity, and leading firms – France's Total and Malaysia's Petronas – are expected to increase exploration. Petronas, currently operating the Benda and Chenguitti gas and oil fields, faces technical and geological challenges. Moreover, according to the EIU report, the future of both fields is unclear given their weak output. The report likewise claims that Total is moving ahead with its experimental exploration programme in the Taoudeni area, despite the lack of appropriate infrastructure, particularly with regard to transportation. Despite Mauritania's precarious economic situation, it is set to improve in 2010, especially in light of the political crisis that dominated 2008 and much of 2009. With the inflow of foreign assistance funds and the government's focus on improving the business climate, the country's economy might see a turn for the better. The sustainability of such improvements would depend mostly on deeper institutional changes, but the government must be serious in its pursuit of economic reform.

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