

# The Coup d'Etat in Mauritania and the Repercussions on its Relationship with the EU

**Seyid Ouldabah**

Professor of Philosophy, Mauritania

The coup d'État overthrowing President Ould Taya on 3rd August 2005 went beyond the classic format of a coup, already experienced in Mauritania – a peaceful Putsch with the consensus of the military –, and constituted a specific case in terms of its objectives and political ramifications.

This method of change of government implemented by the military, although frequently used in Africa, is in fact considered as unconstitutional and illegal by the international community. This viewpoint has, since the end of the Cold War, become an institutionalized diplomatic policy.

The European Union in particular, in its agreements signed with different partners, demands the respect of democratic legality and reiterates its firm refusal to ratify unconstitutional changes. In this context the coup d'État of 3rd August 2005 was heartily condemned from the very beginning by the European Union, which expressed its reaction through the voice of the European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Louis Michel, who deplored “the taking of power by force” and called for the respect of democracy and the legal institutional framework.

The Commission stressed that it will continue to follow the evolution of events very closely and at a future time “will assess the situation with regard to the provisions applicable according to the Cotonou agreement of which Mauritania is a signatory” (an explicit reference to the provisions of article 9 of the Cotonou ACP-EC Agreement).

The main European partners of Mauritania (France, Spain) followed the Commission in their strong condemnation of the Putsch.

However, once the first declarations of the military council had been made, the reaction of the different local and unofficial political forces was one of qualified appreciation for the change, which, although certainly formally illegal, could not be condemned in its aim of reform, seeking to rectify a politically untenable situation and clean up a democracy in deep crisis (political deadlock, drift towards authoritarian rule, exploitation of the administrative and judicial systems during the electoral process, and growing instability since the successive previous Putsch attempts in 2003 and 2004).

The crucial question which arises in this context is as follows: how should we view a coup de force which draws its legitimacy from a genuine popular following and global political consensus, rather than from formal judiciary procedures?

If the democratic ethos is the criteria for the evaluation of the legitimacy of a method of political change, should we not consider the coup d'État of 3rd August to be a salutary action, establishing the unbiased and necessary conditions for a peaceful, democratic alternation of power?

It is thus that Mauritania's different partners have begun to revise their attitudes towards the transition government, ever since the first speech of the President of the Military Council to the nation on 2nd September 2005. This stipulated, among other points, a substantial constitutional reform, which guaranteed a genuine alternation via the introduction of important constitutional amendments.

These concerned the election of the President of the Republic (eligibility with a mandate of 5 years renewable only once and the non-compatibility of the position of Head of State with any other political function).

The President of the Military Council also granted an amnesty to political prisoners, and made a commitment to strengthen political freedom during the transition period, which had been reduced from 2 years to 18 months.

Consultation days, extended to include all elements from the field of politics and civil society, were organised in November 2005. As to the outcome of these days, a large consensus emerged from the consultations concerning the main lines of change, particularly provisions for regulating the electoral process. Within this context an independent commission for the supervision of elections was set up, in direct consultation with the politicians concerned.

These initiatives were welcomed and encouraged by the European Union, which opened consultations with a large Mauritanian delegation in Brussels on 1st December 2005.

Whilst reiterating its constant position of condemning the taking of power by force, it has nevertheless noted its satisfaction as to the promises kept by the transition government in the memorandum presented to the Brussels meeting. The Mauritanian authorities made a commitment to provide periodic reports on the state of evolution of the transition process. On the basis of this agreement, the European Union showed its support for the political reforms recommended by the Mauritanian party and welcomed “the full cooperation of the Mauritanian authorities, which is of capital importance in enabling the Union to

continue to assist that country in its development efforts”.

The Brussels meetings were followed by a number of evaluation missions, which allowed European delegations visiting Nouakchott to assess the efforts taken by the Military Council and the transitional government in the context of the aforementioned commitments.

To this end a parliamentary delegation of the joint ACP/EU assembly, presided over by Mrs Glenys Kinnock, stayed in Nouakchott, from 23rd to 24th February 2006. After this mission the European Union decided to provide financial support for the election budget (6 million Euros).

A number of representatives of European civil society, including Mrs Kim Campbell and Mr Cassam Vteen from the Club of Madrid, visited Nouakchott and declared support for the transition. These different initiatives and meetings made it possible to resume economic cooperation between Mauritania and the European Union from the beginning of May 2006.

In a press conference held in Nouakchott, on 4th May 2006, the MEP Luisa Fernanda Rudi Ubeda declared the European Union to be satisfied with the transition measures and the efforts to rectify the economy accomplished by the Mauritanian government. It decided

to re-establish its regular aid to Mauritania, and to support and sustain the electoral process in its future phases (referendum on constitutional amendments on 24th June 2006 – legislative and municipal elections on 19th november 2006 – Senatorial elections on 21st January 2007 – Presidential elections on 11th March 2007).

This decision could be considered to be the realization of an alliance which as gradually substituted the first hostile European reaction to the changes of 3rd August.