Mauritania: Changing to Remain the Same?

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Mauritania in 2021 is witnessing a pivotal transition, as one regime and its rules end, and another takes its place. An unexpected succession crisis has challenged presidential immunity and elite impunity, as former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and several ministers find themselves under indictment for corruption, while current President Mohamed Ould Cheikh Ghazouani, Abdel Aziz’s anointed successor, promises to pursue good governance and address the Covid recession with a more ambitious social policy of redistribution and reinvestment in public goods. Yet Mauritians are no longer waiting for Ghazouani’s promises, and instead are increasingly mobilizing to demand redress for their grievances, as well as more proactive measures to address the current economic crisis.

Prosecuting the Corrupt, or Corrupting the Prosecution?

Since spearheading a 2008 coup, Abdel Aziz has loomed large over Mauritanian politics, securing two terms as President from 2009 to 2019, and allegedly presiding over a vast patronage network that captured Mauritania’s considerable rents from its fisheries, minerals, oil and now natural gas, in addition to private holdings. After a thwarted attempt at launching a bid for an unconstitutional third term, Abdel Aziz then campaigned for Ghazouani. Ghazouani, a former general, armed forces chief of staff and defence minister, had served alongside Abdel Aziz for nearly three decades and had long been considered the incumbent’s trustworthy adjutant. Many observers had assumed that Abdel Aziz would remain the power behind the throne, with Ghazouani a mere figurehead. However, Abdel Aziz’s return to Mauritania’s capital, Nouakchott, and attempted interference in politics in October 2019 saw him sidelined, then indicted for corruption and detained. In subsequent proceedings, several cabinet ministers and former prime ministers have been indicted for corruption after being called to testify before a select parliamentary committee on corruption. Few have stuck by Abdel Aziz, with many former associates defecting to side with the new administration. Former exiles such as Moustapha Ould Limam Chafi and lesser-known domestic political figures have also risen to prominence. Abdel Aziz’s prosecution would create a precedent and define the limits of the Mauritanian constitution’s article 93, which protects presidents from prosecution for any crime short of high treason. This campaign also encompassed some foreign investors in Mauritania. The overlap between the Ghazouani Administration’s opponents and those on trial was clear, however, particularly in light of previous weaponization of corruption charges. Abdel Aziz himself had been quick to

Good Governance, the COVID-19 Shock and the Future of the Rentier Economy

Perceptions of corruption, as well as the enduring role of oligarchic networks in Mauritania’s economy, have long contributed to the perceptions of opacity and uncertainty. Disputes over taxation have also contributed to perceptions of legal ambiguity. In addition to Nouakchott’s challenges in attracting foreign direct investment, successive governments have struggled in their attempts to diversify the country’s economy from the extractive sector. Nouakchott has long counted on the development of its offshore liquid natural gas reserves, in coordination with Senegal, through multinational oil and gas firms. Exploration and exploitation proceeded based on assumptions of pre-COVID price and demand, as did government planning.

In consequence, the COVID demand shock, followed by announcements that some firms would exit Mauritania entirely, has hit Nouakchott hard, particularly given its public debt and dependence on income from extractives to finance its public spending promises. In the wake of these developments, the new government has sought to attract foreign investment from other sources, as well as to broaden the formal economy.

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Mauritania suffered its first confirmed COVID-19 fatality on 30 March, 2020, following its first reported case on 13 March, 2020. Since then, the novel Coronavirus has claimed the lives of over 20,000 Mauritians. COVID-19 exposed the weaknesses of public health in Mauritania, as elsewhere, while its economic ramifications led to growing hardships for Mauritians. Though official unemployment figures changed little over the course of 2020, the economic impact of COVID-19 was clear and far-reaching. In an attempt to respond to public demands amid the COVID-19 crisis, in November 2020 Ghazouani committed to several ambitious public spending measures, including doubling the base rate for pensions, doubling widows’ pensions and health insurance contributions and raising educational spending allowances. This followed on Ghazouani’s earlier

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6 The key economic development of the decade for Mauritania came in December 2018, with the final agreement between the Senegalese and Mauritanian government, as well as private partners BP and Kosmos Energy, for the extraction of liquified natural gas from the Grand Tortue Ahmeyin (GTA) offshore fields. These fields span the maritime borders of Mauritania and Senegal, and their output, scheduled to begin in 2022, is expected to average 2.5 million tonnes per year.


12 Year over year unemployment rose only 0.5% to 10.7% in 2020; Unemployment, total: Mauritania, International Labor Organization, IL-OSTAT database. Data retrieved on 15 June, 2021, data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.ISEU.TOTL.ZS?locations=MR.

promises to build 3,500 new classrooms and recruit 5,500 new teachers in his first term, in a country where 70% of students leave school by age 13, and where a labour mismatch leads to high youth unemployment among graduates.

In the past decade Mauritania has been able to avoid the growing insurgenacies and terrorist attacks that have engulfed its neighbours. In comparison to many worsening trends, Mauritania’s security has been a rare source of consolation – especially relative to neighbouring Mali. Nouakchott has been quick to attribute the lack of terrorist attacks since 2011 to its military prowess, modernization initiatives and deradicalization programmes, though Mauritania’s value to jihadist groups points to other possible reasons for the lack of attacks in the country.

Domestic security, in the form of popular perceptions of rising crime rates since the COVID-induced recession, have emerged as an issue mobilizing Mauritanians.

Grievances and Claims-Making

In the past year Mauritanians have mobilized to demand redress for economic, environmental and social grievances, including the effects of the COVID-induced recession and the simultaneous rise in crime, police brutality and discrimination against Haratines and black African or Afro-Mauritanians. Afro-Mauritanians continue to push for their rights, notably demanding an abrogation of the 1993 amnesty laws that gave perpetrators of the 1987-1991 state violence against them immunity from prosecution, as well as institutionalized discrimination in the education system, working through loosely-aligned civil society organizations such as COVIRE and the Widow’s Collective of Mauritania.

The Haratine, the descendants of former slaves who constitute over a third of the population and a significant constituency in major cities, have emerged from political marginalization to increasing prominence. Activist groups from SOS-Esclaves to IRA-Mauritania press for the rights of Haratines and against the vestiges of slavery in the country. Civil society demands have succeeded in applying pressure on the Ghazouani government to increase representation of both the Haratine and sub-Saharan African Mauritanian ethnic groups. Out of the current cabinet of 26 ministers, five are Haratines and five Afro-Mauritanians, compared to the 80% of senior government leadership positions reserved under the previous government for the Bidan or white Maures, who comprise no more than 30% of the total population.

In sum, Mauritania finds itself at a crossroads. Long-standing political taboos are being broken as a new government consolidates its power, while an increasingly politically conscious urban population reacts to an economic crisis and the growing divide between state policy and public demands.

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