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Has Another Opportunity for Democratic Transition Been Squandered in Mauritania?

Unit for Political Studies

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On June 22, 2019, the ruling party candidate in the Mauritanian elections, Mohamed Ould El Ghazouani won an absolute majority in the first round, contradicting the opinion poll results prior to the elections.⁽¹⁾ This is the first time that power has been peacefully traded in a country that has undergone a number of military coups from 1978 - 2008.

In 2007, Mauritania's path to democratic transition was boosted by the arrival of the first elected civilian president to govern. But the August 6, 2008 coup led by outgoing President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz aborted this experiment. However, the Mauritanian opposition, supported by the African Union, Europe and the United States of America, was able to force the orchestrators of the coup to enter into settlements that culminated in the Dakar agreement, laying the foundations for a return to the democratic process. Presidential elections were held in 2009 and 2014, which were won by President Ould Abdel Aziz. The most recent elections are the third to be run after the agreement.

Behind the Results

The voter turnout in the recent elections reached 62.66%.⁽²⁾ This significantly outnumbers the participation rate in the 2014 presidential election, which was in the range of 56.46%. Mohamed Ould El Ghazouani received 52.01% of the vote and his victory in the first round demonstrates the strength of the coalition that supported him, one represented by power, tribes and Sufi communities. Ould El Ghazouani is a practical embodiment of the convergence of the interests of this triangle; he is second placed in the regime through his leadership of the army and the Ministry of Defense. He played a role in the last military coup alongside the outgoing president. He belongs to a religious family with historical ties to the Sufis in Mauritania and he has a regional affiliation to the Mauritanian east, where the majority of the population reside. During the elections, the declining impact of "political money" and the role of businessmen was noted by outgoing President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who said "The state is stronger than the businessmen."⁽³⁾ This is due to the clash between Ould Abdel Aziz and his most prominent financial backers in 2009; exiled businessman Mohamed Ould Boumatou, who accuses the regime, alongside a number of business men, of seeking to create a new class of affiliated beneficiaries.

The former prime minister and opposition candidate Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar, who received support from the Islamist movement represented by the National Rally for Reform and Development Party (RNRD), came in third with 17.87% of the vote. Surprisingly the rights' activist candidate Biram Dah Abeid placed second with more than 172 thousand votes, or 18.58% of the vote, and was able to beat the President-elect Ould El Ghazouani in Mauritania's second largest city and economic epicenter, Nouadhibou. This means that the human rights discourse on the grievances of certain

1 On the most important poll results, see: Mohamed Yahya Hosni, "What Do Opinion Polls Say about the Mauritanian Presidential Elections?", Ultra Voice, 22/6/2019, accessed 25/6/2019, at: <http://cutt.us/CRpQE>

2 The results can be found on the website of the National Independent Electoral Commission at: <http://ceni.mr/node/92>; <http://www.ceni.mr/node/91>

3 Press Conference of Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, YouTube, 20/6/2019, accessed on 21/6/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2ZYrGb>



social groups, most prominently the Haratin — former slaves who make up the majority of the population — was a factor in the elections. However, some see the numbers drummed up by Biram as the result of a color separation that is developing and poses a threat to the Mauritanian nation and its democratic experience, so that color or ethnicity may become as effective as tribalism.

Concerns of some were confirmed by the low proportion of votes awarded to candidate Mohamed Sidi Mouloud (2.44 percent), who is a progressive face with deep political experience through battling successive military judgments since the 1970s. He is also a candidate for the two combined oldest opposition parties, the Democratic Forces Alliance, led by Ahmed Ould Daddah, the historic leader of the Mauritanian opposition and the Union of Progressive Forces, which is the successor to the Mauritanian workers' movement that was highly active in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, it is possible to say that the traditional Mauritanian opposition parties and their prominent faces began to fade with the rise of new political forces, mainly represented by radical human rights movements considered the emergence of the Emancipation Movement (IRA), headed by prominent representative, Biram Dah Abeid. The Islamist movement represented by RNRD, whose alliance came in third place is also proving to be a powerful new political force.

The Implications of the Election Results on the Regime Structure and its Foreign Relations

The current regime has allowed a reasonable level of political and media freedoms, but it does not hesitate to use repression when need arises. This happened after the announcement of the results of the election with military and paramilitary forces taking to the streets of the capital, Nouakchott to arrest those protesting the results, accusing them of vandalism. Opposition parties' headquarters were also stormed and closed off later, demonstrating the regime's strategy of using repression to deal with political crises and relying on the security approach in their settlement.

It is too early to judge whether President Ould El Ghazouani will bring about radical changes in the structure of the regime amid a dispute between those who believe he will continue the approach of his predecessor and colleague Ould Abdul Aziz, and those who believe he has the power of personality necessary for his own line of approach. The president-elect was keen to use a conciliatory tone in his campaign speech, contrary to the style of his predecessor. Yet this was met with apprehension considering that he was a partner in the previous military coups and that he was practically the candidate at the top of the pyramid of the military establishment.

The election results are unlikely to have much impact on the country's foreign relations. Historically, Mauritania has been keen to distance itself from regional alignments due to the experience of the Western Sahara War. Mauritania suffered heavy losses after its crushing failure, whereby some of the Polisario battalions arrived in Nouakchott. Since then, Mauritania has pursued a balanced foreign policy in which it has tried to play a neutral role in mediating conflicts with the exception of the 1980s when Senegal accused Mauritania of supporting a military coup led by Mauritanian officers.

Ould Abdel Aziz's rule was characterized by a combination of a somewhat confrontational foreign policy and an interventionist policy based on mediation for the sake of diplomatic recognition and effectiveness. This was evident during the crisis with Morocco and the bias towards Algerian choices at times as well as its intervention in several regional issues. But the blockade of Qatar represented the peak of Mauritania's involvement in the axis policy following its decision to sever diplomatic relations with the State of Qatar and its compliance with the countries staging the blockade. Of all the regional countries that adopted a biased position towards the blockade, only Mauritania has maintained its biased position. Indeed, at his last press conference on the eve of the presidential elections, the outgoing Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz reiterated his hostility to Qatar, saying that he had wanted to cut ties with them immediately after the Arab Spring.⁽⁴⁾ In his last interview, Ould Abdel Aziz appeared as if he wanted to bequeath his political legacy to his successor Ould al-Ghazouani, who has strong relations with Abu Dhabi's ruler Mohammed bin Zayed. Thus, the Mauritanian position supporting the Saudi-Emirati axis is expected to continue.

The status of Ould Abdel Aziz after the Election

Ould Abdel Aziz maintained a strong presence in Ould El Ghazouani's campaign and announced that he had backed his nomination. But as much as the support of Ould Abdel Aziz strengthened El Ghazouani's campaign it also complicated the campaign as Ould El Ghazouani appeared to be a guardian of the legacy of Ould Abdel Aziz, rather than a prospect for addressing the thirst for change and modernization. Many hope to change the current reality that is plagued by high unemployment and poverty. Ould Abdel Aziz did not hide his intention to remain in the political scene, but not as head of government, but perhaps through his presidency of the ruling UPR party, as he pointed out in his last interview.⁽⁵⁾ Earlier, he made a statement in the southern city of Rosso that he would monitor state projects from inside and outside the palace, which some interpreted as an attempt to play the role of custodian of the new leader of Mauritania given reports about the involvement of Ould Abdel Aziz in corruption cases that required him to remain in the scene, fearing legal accountability.

The position of the military establishment

The military still maintains the most important position in the Mauritanian political scene, given the consensus of its leaders to support the new president, who is their sole representative. The presence of some of its prominent faces in Ould El Ghazouani's electoral campaign was noted. But its formal neutrality in elections, especially as the military and security vote alongside the civilians on the same day unlike elections past, is indicative of a certain degree of its confidence in its control over the situation. The position of the military has not been exposed to a real test of its position

4 Ibid

5 Ibid



on democracy and the peaceful transfer of power, as the Authority is being traded between former officers expressing their interests. It is not known what the position of the army would be if a non-army sanctioned candidate had won.

The Internal and External Positions of the Election Results

Opposition candidates were unanimous in rejecting the election results, for various reasons. According to a statement signed by the opposition quartet participating in the elections, it was impossible, in light of their own results, that any of the candidates won outright in the first half. They therefore decided to conduct a peaceful struggle to protect “choices” and democratic gains. The four candidates called on their supporters to take to the streets and protest but they postponed their protest march to Thursday, June 27, 2019, after a sudden plea from the Minister of the Interior, the outbreak of riots in the capital Nouakchott and the spread of security forces who surrounded the most important locations where the protests began the night before the results were announced.

Mauritanian authorities have taken strict additional security measures, including the complete shutdown of the Internet,⁽⁶⁾ raiding and closing down the party headquarters of opposition. Additionally, the Interior Ministry issued a statement warning against the protest not long before the Minister of the Interior himself blamed foreign intrigue for the protests at a press conference.⁽⁷⁾ The Mauritanian Foreign Ministry summoned the ambassadors of Mali, Senegal and Gabon⁽⁸⁾ against the background of the riots in which Mauritania said foreigners had participated. Summoning the ambassadors of these countries brings to mind an attempt to chart an ethnic map of the looming political crisis.

The United States Embassy in Nouakchott called for respect for freedom of expression and assembly as a necessity for democracy and also called on the parties to the process to engage in peaceful dialogue at some point in time after the elections.⁽⁹⁾ The United Nations intervened to prevent the crisis from escalating through interviews by the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for West Africa with the opposition leaders and President-elect Ould El Ghazouani, but he did not disclose information about what he was talking about except urging them to remain calm.⁽¹⁰⁾ Despite France’s strategic interests in Mauritania, and despite protesters storming the Mauritanian embassy

6 “A complete shutdown of the Internet in Mauritania”, *Alakhbar* (Independent Mauritanian News Agency, 25/6/2019, accessed 26/6/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2YhjFye>)

7 “Foreign Minister meets with ambassadors of Mali, Senegal and the Gambia”, *Alakhbar*, 25/6/2019, accessed 26/6/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2xcUCk8>

8 “Mauritania: Recalling the Ambassadors of Mali, Senegal and the Gambia regarding Riots”, Sahara Media, 25/6/2019, accessed 27/6/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2J8cdzf>

9 “US Embassy in Nouakchott: Freedom of Expression and Assembly Necessary for the Continuation of Democracy”, *Alakhbar*, 24/6/2019, accessed 26/6/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2ZKTGQ4>

10 UN envoy holds meetings with opposition candidates for the presidency of Mauritania,” *Alakhbar*, 24/6/2019, accessed 26/6/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2FCQnCW>



in Paris, the French response was remarkably quiet. The Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi contacted Ould El Ghazouani, according to Mohammed bin Zayed's official Twitter account,⁽¹¹⁾ and the Moroccan King Mohammed VI was the second Arab leader to send his congratulations to the Ould El Ghazouani.⁽¹²⁾

Conclusion

The elections represent an opportunity for genuine democratic transition. But it is difficult to make good of this opportunity, given the military's insistence on playing a political role, controlling the results and the subsequent civilian rejection. The current impasse brings back memories of 2008, after the overthrow of the first elected civilian president, although that was a military coup against an elected civilian president. Now, power is administered through ballot boxes among the military establishment. Can the pressure of the crisis internationally spur the regime towards a political settlement that achieves a kind of power sharing arrangement in Mauritania? Or will it take the unilateral approach and continue to use security and alienation mechanisms despite the political, economic and social suffering across the country?

¹¹ "The King of Morocco Congratulates El Ghazouani and Looks Forward to Strong Relations", *Alakhbar*, 24/6/2019, accessed 27/6/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2Kif5WD>

¹² "Spain Congratulates El Ghazouani and Renews its Commitment to the Development of Mauritania", *Alakhbar*, 24/6/2019, accessed 27/6/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2LoegSo>