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**Mauritania: On the Road to Democracy
or Just More Violence?**

Dorina A. Bekoe

September 2012
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IDA Document D-4834
H 13-0003781

INSTITUTE FOR DEFENSE ANALYSES
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Alexandria, Virginia 22311-1882



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This work was conducted by the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) under contract 2012-12062700-003, Global Coverage Analyses Program. The views, opinions, and findings should not be construed as representing the official position of the U.S. Government.

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Executive Summary

- Despite Mauritania's formal adoption of democracy in 1991, it remained an oppressive autocracy under the leadership of President Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya. After Taya was ousted in a 2005 coup d'état, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was elected president in 2007, in the country's freest and fairest election.
- Although the coup d'état and its transition process held the promise that Mauritania would finally take definitive steps toward democratization, it has proceeded fitfully. A second coup deposed Abdallahi; General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who led the 2008 coup, was elected in 2009.
- In addition to the military coup, since 2005, the country has also seen a sharp surge in political violence and protests – a typical occurrence in new democracies, which rarely have the institutions to successfully manage conflict.
- The Mauritanian government has responded to the violence and protests with a mixture of conflict mitigating strategies, negotiations, and force. Yet, the political opposition has hardened its positions and tension remains. While Mauritania's post-2005 political climate is tense, it is not likely to result in large-scale violence. Continued frustration with the lack of democratic progress, however, entrenches the political impasse and could set the stage for another coup d'état.
- Another coup d'état would be highly criticized by the international community, but might not result in significant penalties for Mauritania, an important actor in fighting terrorism in the Sahel.



INSTITUTE FOR DEFENSE ANALYSES

GLOBAL COVERAGE ANALYSES PROGRAM – AFRICA

TRACKING AND ISSUE PAPER



PREDICTING VIOLENCE IN “RE-EMERGING” DEMOCRACIES

**MAURITANIA: ON THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY
OR JUST MORE VIOLENCE?**

DORINA A. BEKOE

SEPTEMBER 28, 2012

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Mauritania: On the Road to Democracy or Just More Violence?

Introduction: Big Picture and Main Questions

Research shows that new democracies are inherently more violent than more established democracies.¹ But what happens when democratic starts are punctuated by coups d'état or fail to take hold, restarting multiple times? More precisely, when a democratic experiment fails, as it did in Mauritania in 1991, are efforts to revive it accompanied by violence? Mauritania's most recent effort at democracy occurred following the 2005 coup d'état. This return to democracy has been accompanied, however, by political instability, public protests, and incidents of violence. What does this portend for Mauritania in the short term? Will political instability and violence define Mauritania's future in the short run?

This case study explores the post-2005 political environment in Mauritania. In particular, it examines the level of political protest and violence since 2005 and the responses taken by government to such incidents. These analyses suggest that democratic norms are weak, and public frustration with the slow progress is high. The government has responded with measures of accommodation and negotiation to defuse the tension, as well as force to dispel protestors. Dissatisfaction and resolve among the opposition continue and could result in another coup d'état.

The 2005 Coup d'état: Causes and Consequences

President Ould Taya himself obtained power by overthrowing Lt. Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Heydalla in 1984. Attempting to legitimize his government and succumbing to international pressures, Ould Taya, introduced democracy in 1991, organizing first a constitutional referendum and then multiparty elections in 1992. But, in Ould Taya's Mauritania, there was little tolerance for democratic norms; he famously declared that "in Mauritania, there are no political opponents, only malcontents."² The government routinely imprisoned and harassed political opponents, manipulated elections, exacerbated existing ethnic divisions to its advantage, and influenced the judiciary.³

Over the years, the Ould Taya regime survived a number of failed coups d'état and an armed resistance movement formed – *Les Cavaliers du Changement* (the Knights of Change). But, in August 2005, Ould Taya's trusted officers, Col. Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, the director of national security, and Vall's cousin, Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz,

the commandant of the presidential guard,⁴ ousted him while he was out of the country. Col. Vall defended the coup by citing Ould Taya's autocratic regime and vowed to bring democracy to Mauritania.⁵ While the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union quickly suspended Mauritania as required by protocol, condemnation from the international community was slight. Many believed that the ouster of Ould Taya presented Mauritania with the opportunity to restart its democratization process.⁶ Col. Vall's declaration that the country would be returned to civilian rule within two years was particularly welcomed.

Developments since 2005: Elections, Institutional Reforms, and Another Coup

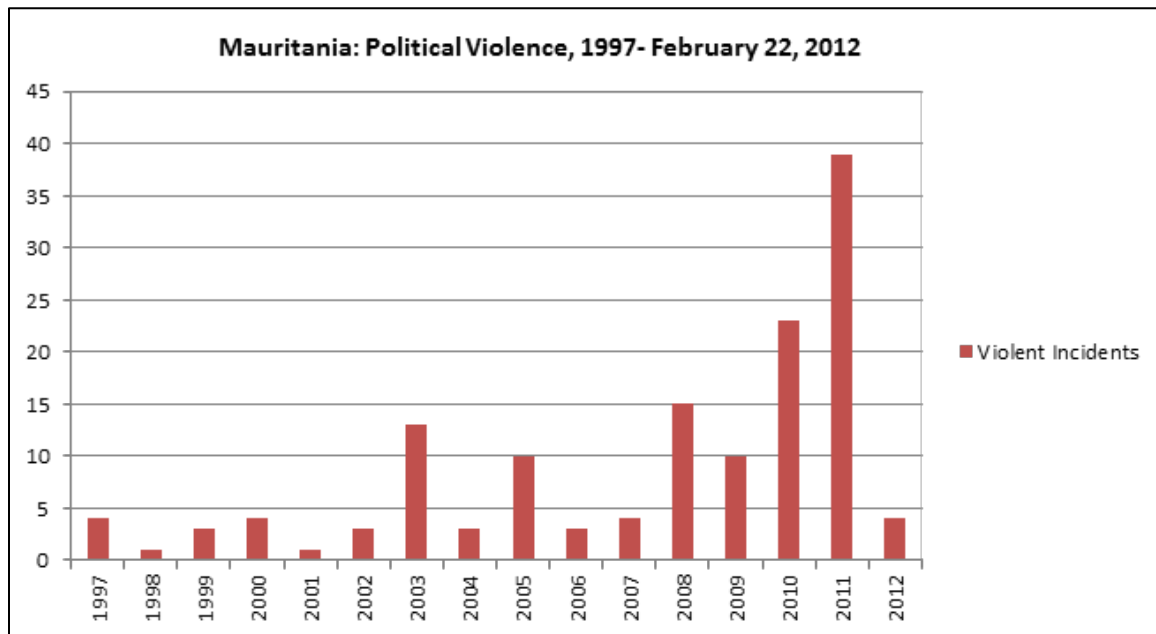
The 2005 military junta kept its promises, organizing senate, national assembly, and presidential elections in 2006 and 2007.⁷ In preparation of the polls, the junta organized national consultations to discuss the transition and passed a referendum on constitutional reforms that imposed a two-term limit on presidential terms, along with other reforms. The campaigns were inclusive and peaceful, and the elections were observed by the international community.⁸ President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdullahi was elected with 52.9 percent in the second round.⁹

Yet, though the military junta had fulfilled this important promise, and many hailed the transition to civilian rule, the country still needed reforms. Most pressingly, improvements were needed in civil-military relations, human rights legislation, political party formation, and dismantling of the patronage network that had marginalized so many Mauritians.¹⁰ Thus, in a reminder that elections alone are an insufficient barometer of the progress of democracy, in August 2008, President Abdallahi was deposed in a coup, led by Abdel Aziz. Abdallahi's critics accused him of corruption, cronyism, links to Ould Taya, and mishandling of the growing terrorist threat.¹¹ As before, the junta promised to hold elections in short order. Unlike the 2005 coup, however, the international community was more critical – seeing this as a break in a democratic transition, rather than a chance to restart democracy.¹²

Presidential elections were again held as promised, but not without controversy. Abdel Aziz, after hinting that he would not run,¹³ competed and won the 2009 presidential election with 52 percent in the first round.¹⁴ It was a decidedly different atmosphere than in 2007. Notably, the political opposition threatened to boycott the elections, which precipitated a short power-sharing arrangement with Aziz (the 2009 Dakar Agreement) until agreement could be found on a number of key election-related issues.¹⁵ Still, the main opposition parties denounced the results of the presidential election.¹⁶

Political Violence Since 2005

Political and social dissatisfaction has generally increased despite the changes in government. Indeed, the years since the 2008 coup, in particular, have been marked by sustained and increased public protests by citizens, civil society organizations, and the political opposition (see chart below). The data are from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED), which collects information on conflict and political violence in developing states. ACLED data, which range from 1997 to early 2012, document incidents such as military battles fatalities; recruitment by rebel, government, and armed groups; and protests.¹⁷



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (ACLED), <http://www.acleddata.com/>

A total of 108 separate incidents of conflict and political violence have taken place in Mauritania since 2005. Most of the incidents (55 percent) are riots and protests. The next most common incidents of conflict and political violence (approximately 22 percent) are battles between the government and Islamists, including Al Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM). Demonstrators protested government policies; working conditions; and the need for political – in particular, calling on President Aziz to step down.

Most of the violent incidents (78 percent) have taken place in the capital, Nouakchott. Of those, approximately 65 percent were categorized in the dataset as riots or protests. The table and accompanying map (below) show the location of the violent incidents. The locations of Chegga and Kobenni are approximate, since they do not appear on the map supplied by Reliefweb. The locations of Tuabo, Tourine, Ghallawiya, and Lemgheity are approximated by the nearest cities (identified in parentheses in the table).

The army occasionally reacted by deploying teargas against the demonstrators, but fatalities have been rare. Since 2005, 115 fatalities in 12 locations were recorded by the ACLED dataset. The highest numbers of fatalities (representing 78 percent of all fatalities) were recorded during violent incidents in four locations: Mghieti (48 fatalities); Bassikounou (10 fatalities); Nema (20 fatalities); and Tourine (12 fatalities). The other locations had between one and three fatalities each.¹⁸

Political Violence, 2005 – February 22, 2012

Location	No. Incidents
Nouakchott	84
Abdel Bagrou	3
Nema	3
Tuabo (Sélibaby on map)	2
Mghieti (Timbédra on map)	2
Nouadhibou	2
Zouerate	1
Lekseiba	1
Tourine (F'Derik on map)	1
Adrar	1
Bassikounou	1
Chegga (approximated)	1
Ghallawiya (Dahklet Nouadhibou on map)	1
Kaedi	1
Kayes (in Mali)	1
Kobenni (approximated)	1
Lemgheity (Chinguetti on map)	1
Maghama	1
Total	108

Source: ACLED, <http://www.acleddata.com>



Source: <http://reliefweb.int/map/mauritania/mauritania-general-logistics-planning-map-19-sep-2012>

Notably, all of these large-scale fatalities occurred during clashes between the army and AQIM operatives or other suspected Islamists. Thus, for the most part, Mauritians have not died while protesting the government, though they have clashed violently with government security officers. But their sustained pressure on the government for reforms, calls on Aziz to step down, and general dissatisfaction pose a threat to Mauritania's stability. Demonstrations have been organized by the political opposition as well as civil society organizations.

The Growing Political Opposition

Despite the fact that the presidential election took place as promised after the 2008 coup and the government took the unusual step of entering into a unity government to resolve outstanding electoral issues, the standoff between President Abdel Aziz and the coalition of several of the main opposition groups, the Coordination of Democratic

Opposition (COD), has persisted. Among the most significant members of the COD are the Rally of Democratic Forces, Tawassoul (representing the Muslim Brotherhood), and the Union of Forces of Progress (representing many trade unions).¹⁹ Notably, Tawassoul was part of the presidential majority until June 2011, when it joined the COD.²⁰ Equally notable, Col. Vall, who led the 2005 coup, urged Mauritians to take part in the COD's demonstrations against the ruling party.²¹

The last two years have seen some of the highest and most significant protests by the political opposition. Threats by the COD to boycott the 2011 senate and national assembly elections (which were scheduled for April and October, respectively), amid claims that the government failed to live up to the promises in the Dakar agreement for a more consultative approach to organizing elections, resulted in their indefinite postponement.²² Throughout 2012, the COD regularly mobilized its supporters to protest the actions of the government and called for Aziz to step down. In June, the COD organized one of its largest protests – a reported 90,000 marched in Nouakchott,²³ calling for a government of national unity.²⁴

The government at first responded to the growing pressure of the opposition by attempting to start a national dialogue. While this worked initially, both the COD and the government have since announced that they are not willing to engage in dialogue.²⁵ In August, the opposition agreed to a charter that rejected any resolution to the political impasse that did not involve the departure of President Aziz.²⁶ In September, the COD assembled a dossier of high ranking members of the Aziz government who have “committed crimes against the Mauritanian people,” and whom they intend to bring to justice in a court of law.²⁷

Public Protest Movements

Paralleling the standoff between the ruling party and the opposition, civil society organizations and social movements have increased the number of demonstrations. These demonstrations have been organized to protest unemployment, criticize the census required to revise the voter registry,²⁸ demand some relief over the rising cost of living, and call for Aziz to step down.²⁹ Of particular prominence have been the February 25, *Touche pas à ma Nationalité* (TPMN, Don't Touch My Nationality) and Anti-Slavery Movements.

The February 25 Movement, formed in the wake of a Mauritanian's attempt to copy the immolation of Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi, which set off the Arab Spring, has been at the forefront of protests over a range of issues.³⁰ Comprising mainly youth, the February 25 Movement has protested through street demonstrations and sit-ins over issues such as corruption, the involvement of the military in politics, injustice, and repression.³¹ The government has responded both forcefully with security officers as well as with conciliatory measures – such as an invitation to dialogue.³²

Mauritania's history of tense race relations and slavery have been brought to the fore with the Initiative for the Resurgence of Abolitionism in Mauritania (IRA) and the TPMN movements. The TPMN was formed in response to the government's proposed census to update the voter registry. Many African-Mauritanians felt particularly singled out to prove their nationality by speaking Hassaniya, a dialect of Arabic.³³ Moreover, TPMN argues that the documentation of African-Mauritanians would result in discrimination and possibly deportation, which had occurred in 1989.³⁴ TPMN demonstrated regularly throughout 2012; their actions frequently resulted in clashes with security forces.

Closely tied to the TPMN movement is the anti-slavery IRA. While Mauritania officially abolished slavery in 2007, it continues. The president of the IRA, Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid, was recently released from prison,³⁵ having been arrested in May 2012 for burning Islamic texts that he contended condoned slavery.³⁶ Even though the IRA apologized for the action and the apostasy charge was dismissed, Biram remained in prison until September 3. During Biram's time in prison, the IRA staged several demonstrations on his behalf and to bring the issue of slavery to the forefront.³⁷

Workers' Strikes

Alongside the demonstrations by civil society organizations and political opposition parties, workers have increasingly opted to strike for better working conditions and wages. Prominent among the strikers have been the workers at Canada's Kinross Gold mine in Tasiast (northwest Mauritania; see map above). Kinross' Tasiast mine is among the company's most important; the revenues from Tasiast are expected to propel Kinross into one of the world's fastest growing gold companies.³⁸

In June 2012, approximately 1,500 workers at Tasiast went on strike for five days.³⁹ The strike reportedly cost Kinross \$43,000 per hour and brought production to a halt.⁴⁰ Workers protested poor working conditions, an action precipitated by the dismissal of a colleague who was ill. Among the conditions won by the workers in the negotiations were an increase in pay of 50 percent; the reinstatement of their colleague; establishment a health clinic on site; and an increase in the number of Mauritanians who work at the mine (while reducing of the number of expatriates).⁴¹ Perhaps in a further gesture of goodwill, in September 2012, Kinross donated \$100,000 to provide meals to 1 million Mauritanians under the University of Guelph's Fight against Hunger Program, designed to relieve those suffering from the food crisis in the Sahel.⁴²

Is There Link to the Arab Spring?

Given the degree of dissent and the formation of the February 25 movement, it is important to consider the centrality of the Arab Spring to Mauritania's protest movements. Indeed, although the Arab Spring was instrumental in forming the February

25 Movement, it is not the cornerstone of the unrest in Mauritania. The breadth of the issues engaging the protestors and the disparate groups organizing protests do not have the cohesion characterizing the wave of demonstrations in North Africa and the Middle East. Moreover, while the Arab Spring might have been central to the February 25 Movement, it is not an integral part of the discourse of other protestors. Besides, the data show that the level of political violence was on the rise two years before the Arab Spring.

Conclusion

As the data and the anecdotes bear out, Mauritania has been besieged by actions taken by ordinary people and organized movements to seek improvements to their political and daily lives. The government's response has been mixed. While in some cases, it has responded with heavy security; in other instances, the government has tried to negotiate. Neither has been successful in quelling dissent.

Going forward, more dissent is expected, and democratic progress will slow. With the national assembly elections now indefinitely postponed, Mauritania is on the verge of a constitutional crisis, as the legislators are overstaying their mandate. The regional security concerns sparked by the coup d'état in Mali and the subsequent strengthening of Islamists will likely translate into less attention paid to the internal crises – thus exacerbating the grievances voiced by the opposition and civil society groups. In fact, the president of the ruling *Union pour la République* (UPR, Union for the Republic) has criticized the actions of the opposition as “improper” lamenting that “the army, given the current confrontation with the enemy (terrorism) had to be subjected to the cascade of communiqués issued by the opposition.”⁴³

Unless the opposition groups and civil society organizations can successfully coordinate their movements, the government will likely respond with the same mixture of offers to negotiate and use of force that it has been doing for the last two years. While this will not result in a civil war or similarly intense conflict, Mauritania's democratic progress will stall. This could set the stage for another coup d'état, as opposition groups become frustrated with their lack of progress. The threat of a coup is especially heightened with Col. Vall, the 2005 coup leader, siding with the COD and their calls for Aziz to step down.

Should a coup d'état occur, the international community is likely to view this as highly unfavorable, especially given the regional instability brought on by Mali's April 2012 coup and the possibility (though remote) of a Tuareg rebellion in Niger. Still, it is not clear that international condemnation would be accompanied by significant sanctions (especially to the military), given Mauritania's importance in fighting terrorism in the Sahel – a calculation that might dissuade the opposition groups from backing a coup.

Notes

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) September 2012		2. REPORT TYPE IAD Draft Final		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) 07-2012 – 03-2013	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Mauritania: On the Road to Democracy or Just More Violence?				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER 2012-12062700-003	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER — — — —	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER — — — —	
6. AUTHOR(S) Dorina A. Bekoe				5d. PROJECT NUMBER — — — —	
				5e. TASK NUMBER EE-55-3604	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER — — — —	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Institute for Defense Analyses 4850 Mark Center Drive Alexandria, Virginia 22311-1882				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER IDA Document D-4834 Log: H 13-000378	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Institute for Defense Analyses 4850 Mark Center Drive Alexandria, Virginia 22311-1882				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) — — — —	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited (18 July 2013).					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES — — — —					
14. ABSTRACT Despite Mauritania's formal adoption of democracy in 1991, it remained an oppressive autocracy under the leadership of President Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya. After Taya was ousted in a 2005 coup d'état, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was elected president in 2007, in the country's freest and fairest election. Although the coup d'état and its transition process held the promise that Mauritania would finally take definitive steps toward democratization, it has proceeded fitfully. A second coup deposed Abdallahi; General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who led the 2008 coup, was elected in 2009. The Mauritanian government has responded to the violence and protests with a mixture of conflict mitigating strategies, negotiations, and force. Yet, the political opposition has hardened its positions and tension remains. While Mauritania's post-2005 political climate is tense, it is not likely to result in large-scale violence. Continued frustration with the lack of democratic progress, however, entrenches the political impasse and could set the stage for another coup d'état.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Political Violence, Re-democratization, Mauritania					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Unlimited	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 18	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Richard Porterfield
a. REPORT Unclassified	b. ABSTRACT Unclassified	c. THIS PAGE Unclassified			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code) 703-578-2812