

Web Commentary

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Mauritania's Coup: Domestic Complexities and International Dilemmas

By Christopher Boucek

Almost three years to the day of the coup that overthrew longtime Mauritanian strongman Maaouiya Ould Taya, disgruntled military officers ousted the first democratically elected government in the country's history. On the morning of August 6, troops from the elite Presidential Security Battalion (BASEP), led by General Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz, arrested President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, Prime Minister Yahya Ould Ahmed el-Waghef, and Interior Minister Mohamed Ould R'zeizm. The bloodless coup came just hours after the national radio station broadcast a presidential decree removing the nation's four top military officials from their positions. The ousted officers included coup leaders Generals Abdel Aziz and Mohammed al-Ghazwani, the army chief of staff, in addition to the heads of the national guard and the national police.

Once broadcasts resumed, a brief statement on national television announced the establishment of a new governing High State Council. After an initial report indicating a joint civil-military interim administration, the composition of the State Council was revealed to be exclusively comprised of senior military officers led by General Abdel Aziz. Seven of the eleven members of the new State Council are also members of the Military Council for Justice and Democracy that assumed power after the 2005 military coup. Governing authority has been transferred to General Abdel Aziz, who also played a key role in the 2005 coup.

The State Council immediately rescinded the presidential decree that had removed the country's senior military leadership. The junta also referred to Abdallahi as the "former president," and announced plans to hold new elections in the near term, with the State Council overseeing the government in the meantime. In an interview with *Jeune Afrique* shortly after the coup, General Abdel Aziz asserted that the military had acted to save Mauritanian democracy by putting the country back on course.

International actors, including the United States and other major Western governments, as well as international organizations including the United Nations, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and NATO, quickly denounced the coup. The African Union suspended Mauritania. The Arab League and the Arab Maghreb Union announced they would dispatch envoys to assess the situation. The European Union asserted that the coup

would jeopardize a \$240 million five-year pledged assistance program. Two days after Abdallahi's arrest, the United States announced that it would cut \$22 million in non-humanitarian aid, including military-to-military assistance, peacekeeping training, development assistance, mine clearing, and counter-terrorism funding. Washington's move was triggered by statute; \$5 million in food assistance will remain unaffected.

Abdallahi's ouster is the culmination of an ongoing political crisis in Mauritania. Corruption allegations, claims of inadequate representation, and an ongoing dispute with parliament have dogged Abdallahi's short time in office. In May Abdallahi replaced his government with a number of individuals who had served during the Taya regime, sparking accusations of corruption. Earlier last week 48 MPs quit following a vote of no confidence. The parliamentary deserters—believed to be supported by the coup leaders—were at odds with the Abdallahi government over mounting corruption allegations and perceived linkages to the Taya regime. The president's refusal to open investigations into his government's handling of the food crisis and the use of public funds by his wife added to the conflict with parliament. Mauritania is suffering severely from the global food crisis and successive droughts have contributed to the country's hardships. The government's struggle to alleviate hardship conditions was also a major factor in the political turmoil that preceded the coup. Some analysis has suggested that the coup leaders' closeness to the parliamentary deserters likely spurred Abdallahi to fire the generals in the first place.

The Taya regime had frequently used the danger of violent Islamism to justify repressive measures and banned Islamist parties. A foiled 2003 coup, driven in part by feuds among regime insiders, was cast by the regime as part of the "War on Terror." Some reports suggest that the military was motivated to seize power in part out of a belief that the Abdallahi government had become too accommodating with Islamists. Abdallahi recently began a dialogue with Islamists and alleged terror suspects were recently released from prison. The junta—led by the strongly secular Abdel Aziz—has stated that it will take a hard line on Islamists, a measure likely to be used to help ease international reaction to the coup.

Enduring Challenges

Mauritania is one of the poorest countries in the world, with an estimated 20 percent unemployment rate and much of the population living on less than \$2 a day. The discovery of oil several years ago has yet to make a significant economic impact. Production is at a fraction of previously forecast rates, and the anticipated revenue windfall has failed to materialize. Under the Taya regime, forced Arabization and the creation of nearly 80,000 black Mauritanian refugees fueled historic feelings of discrimination.

Numerous challenges confront the country, highlighting the dangers of prolonged political uncertainty. Situated between Arab North Africa and black sub-Saharan Africa, Mauritania has long lacked a strong unifying national identity. At one point, Taya advanced Islam as a national identity. Endemic corruption, rampant poverty, social inequality, and an absence of resilient civilian institutions plague the country. These

factors contribute to an environment potentially conducive to extremist recruitment and radicalization. In 1999, Mauritania established diplomatic relations with Israel, and became only the third member of the Arab league to host an Israeli embassy. This fact continues to attract domestic and international criticism, especially during Israeli military operations against Palestinian targets.

The rise of Islamist extremism in Mauritania is a growing concern. In June 2005, fifteen Mauritanian soldiers died and seventeen were wounded in a major gun battle at the garrison at Lemgheiti near the Algerian and Malian borders. The GSPC (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, the Algerian predecessor to the regional al-Qaeda organization in the Islamic Maghreb—AQIM) claimed the attack was in “revenge for our brothers who were arrested by the apostate Mauritanian regime over the recent period, and as support for the oppressed Muslims there.”¹ Reports of the attack demonstrated the vulnerability of Mauritania, as over 150 militants were believed to have overrun and looted the Mauritanian post, making off with the army’s weapons, ammunition, and vehicles.

Abdallahi had reportedly acknowledged the existence of terrorist cells in the country recently. The increasing profile of Mauritians within the global jihadi movement, a series of arrests in the country, and reports of a major gun battle in the capital in April following the escape of a wanted terrorist suspect adds to the concerns. The country was the victim of a series of terrorist attacks linked to AQIM. On December 24, 2007, four French tourists were gunned down by militants in the southern city of Aleg, and three days later three Mauritanian soldiers were killed at el-Ghallaouiya in the north of the county. In a February 1, 2008 incident, shots were fired at the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott. Three civilians were wounded in the attack when the gunmen also fired on a nearby nightclub. These incidents followed a February 2007 video in which Ayman al-Zawahiri called on Muslims in Mauritania to take up jihad against their “treasonous” government and expel the Israeli diplomatic mission. In the aftermath of these and other events, the organizers of the Dakar Rally moved the 2008 race, depriving Mauritania of a significant source of foreign income and dealing a blow to the country’s image.

U.S. Policy: Rocks and Hard Places

The United States faces difficult choices in Mauritania that reflect broader tensions in the war on terrorism between security goals and political objectives. Proper placement of the threat posed by Islamist extremism in Mauritania is critical to understanding the coup’s origins and subsequent U.S. policy options. Neither terrorism nor Islamists instigated the current crisis in Mauritania. Nevertheless, these issues are being used in part to justify the military’s actions. Moreover, the military in Mauritania has consistently been a major force in domestic politics. It remains to be seen, however, how soon—if ever—General Abdel Aziz and his follow plotters will fully retreat from government.

Border security, transnational smuggling, and human trafficking remain a major concern in Mauritania, especially as the lines between terror organizations and commercial criminal enterprises blur. In an effort to improve regional security and bolster local capabilities, Washington has established the \$500 million Trans-Saharan Counter-

Terrorism Initiative (TSCTI). An expansion of the Pan-Sahel Initiative, the TSCTI seeks to build regional capacity within partner militaries through training and equipment provision. To monitor the region, the U.S. military utilizes an air base at Tamanrasset in southern Algeria. In a notable escalation of U.S. involvement, in 2004 U.S. Special Forces supported the Nigerien and Malian militaries in combat against the GSPC in the Sahel. This demonstrates the level of importance attached to these issues. Mauritanian border security will continue to be an issue for U.S. policy makers.

Conditions at the moment may not lead to greater instability; however, in the future undergoverned territories such as the Sahel region will be a prime concern for American policy makers. U.S. policy must address the usurpation of democratic governance, yet enduring U.S. national security interests will necessitate attention to issues like porous borders, weak institutions, corruption, and the intersection of terrorism and criminality. Promotion of democratic ideals and security objectives can both be furthered by alleviating long-term sources of disaffection and desperation. Washington has thus far rightly sought to strike a balance between criticism of the coup and aid suspension, especially as it increasingly appears that the coup will survive. The suspended U.S. military assistance programs are likely some of the incentives most appealing to the military-dominated State Council. This suggests that Washington possess useful levers with which to encourage the military to move toward elections. The United States should focus on deploying these incentives in addition to increasing its non-military humanitarian and institutional capacity-building assistance to the country. This combination will help to alleviate conditions in the country, to advance broader regional security interests, and motivate the junta to stage civilian elections.

Note

¹ *Terrorism Focus* 2:11, June 10, 2005.

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