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MINORITY GROUPS IN THE SAHEL
ROUNDTABLE SERIES

MAURITANIA'S POLITICAL CONFLICT DYNAMICS

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Mauritania's Political Conflict Dynamics

For the past two years, Mauritania has experienced regular protests against government policies, the postponed legislative and senate elections, the governance of President Abdel Aziz, and other social issues. Protests have come from a wide range of sectors: political opposition groups, students, business leaders, women, religious groups, anti-slavery organizations, and workers. The government has responded with varying efforts – at times with suppression by the military and at others with negotiated settlements. Neither of these efforts has succeeded in dampening dissatisfaction with the regime, and protesters continue to radicalize rapidly.

Generally, this sustained pressure on the government has been under-reported and under-analyzed by the policy and academic communities. Importantly, there is little understanding of the protests and how the sense of disenfranchisement will evolve: will they turn violent or elicit a national dialogue with the government for a more peaceful resolution? The findings in the wake of the March 2012 coup in Mali are instructive: research showed disenchantment with the traditional political elite long before the coup. Not surprisingly, then, surveys find that the coup has significant popular support.¹ Is Mauritania, then, experiencing a precursor to political violence? Indeed, in light of Mauritania's troubled political history, it is imperative to examine the current social and political tensions.

To explore the context, dimensions, and trajectory of social and political protest in Mauritania, the IDA Africa program convened a roundtable discussion on December 7, 2012. The roundtable featured Professor Boubacar N'Diaye of the College of Wooster and Mr. Khalid Lum of Navanti Group. Roundtable participants included experts on the Sahel and members of the IDA Africa Program. Broadly, the roundtable addressed the possible pathways to resolve Mauritania's political impasse, the implications of the increased frequency of protests and demonstrations, and the impact of Mali's instability have on Mauritania's internal political tensions. The main points of the roundtable discussion, which was held under Chatham House rules, are summarized in this report.

¹ See: Bridges from Bamako, "The Problem with the Political Class," May 16, 2012 (<http://bamakobruce.wordpress.com/2012/05/16/political-class/>); Bridges from Bamako, "Bamako's lone pollster strikes again," June 1, 2012 (<http://bamakobruce.wordpress.com/2012/06/01/bamakos-lone-pollster-strikes-again/>); and Sidiki Guindo, "*Analyse des résultats de l'enquête d'opinion sur la crise Malienne*," May 2012 (http://bamakobruce.files.wordpress.com/2012/06/rapport_sondage_crise_maliennel1.pdf).

Mauritania's Tense Internal Political Dynamics

Mauritania is not considered an electoral democracy. Rated by Freedom House as “Not Free,” it received a rating of 5 for civil liberties and 6 for political rights. The country has experienced two coups, while ostensibly a democracy; there are very limited press and religious freedoms; and there is very little transparency in government transactions.² Thus, while the country adopted multiparty democracy in 1996, it is far from consolidated. A casual review of Mauritania's political history will reveal a pattern of authoritarianism, coups and counter-coups, and military governments. President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who sought to legitimize his seizure of power in the 2008 coup by a presidential election in 2009, is facing an onslaught of dissension and the political process is at an impasse. Indeed, the roundtable participants agreed that Mauritania is facing an acute political crisis. Parts of the political opposition are becoming increasingly more radical, with demands ranging from dialogue to calls for Aziz to step down (even though his term does not expire until 2016).

Critical voices in the opposition include the political coalition, *Coordination de l'Opposition Démocratique* (COD); the anti-slavery *Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste* (IRA); the Haratine (Mauritania's black Moors, who have a history of enslavement); youth movements such as the February 25 movement and *Touche pas à ma Nationalité* (TPMN, “Don't Touch My Nationality”). As elaborated below, each of these groups has sustained pressure and protests against the government and show clear signs of taking high political risks to highlight their dissatisfaction.

- *Coordination de l'Opposition Démocratique*: Key Members include the Rally of Democratic Forces, Tawassoul (representing the Muslim Brotherhood), and the Union of Forces of Progress (representing many trade unions).³ The COD, which does not consider Aziz legitimate,⁴ threatened to boycott the legislative and senate elections (which were to have been held in October 2011 and April 2011, respectively; they were not held and are yet to be rescheduled). In the course of 2012, the COD has staged regular protests. In the wake of the allegedly accidental shooting of Aziz by a military officer in October 2012, the COD called for his ouster.

² “Mauritania 2012,” *Freedom in the World 2012* (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2012/mauritania>).

³ Ahmed Ould Jedou, “Mauritania: Dreaming about the Fall of the Military State,” *African Futures*, Social Science Research Council, September 18, 2012 (<http://forums.ssrc.org/african-futures/2012/09/18/mauritania-dreaming-about-the-fall-of-the-military-state/>).

⁴ Africa Review, “Mauritania's Opposition Boycotts Independence Celebrations,” November 28, 2012 (<http://www.africareview.com/News/Mauritania-opposition-boycotts-independence-fete/-/979180/1632170/-/g8dkwoz/-/index.html>).

- *Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste*: The IRA aims to end slavery in Mauritania. Principally, this represents the interests of the Haratine, who are slaves and descendants of slaves; they are considered different from Mauritania's black African population.⁵ Although officially abolished, there are an estimated 500,000 black Mauritians who remain enslaved.⁶ The IRA dominated the news in May 2012 when the state security services detained its president Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid for four months for burning pages in the Malikite theological book that justified slavery. Abeid did apologize for burning the books, but some considered that the IRA had gone too far in these protest actions.⁷
- February 25 Movement: The February 25 Movement, comprising mainly youth, formed in 2011 following a Mauritanian's attempt to copy the immolation of Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi, which set off the Arab Spring. The February 25 Movement's principal objective is to dissociate the military from politics. It has also used street demonstrations and sit-ins to protest corruption, injustice, and repression.⁸
- *Touche pas à ma Nationalité* (Don't Touch My Nationality): TPMN was formed in response to the government's proposed census, as a means to update the voter registry. Black Mauritians felt particularly sensitive about their nationality when required to speak Mauritania's Hassaniya, a dialect of Arabic.⁹ Fueling TPMN's criticism is the memory of the thousands of black Mauritians who, in 1989, were labeled foreign and deported.¹⁰

As vocal and visible as the COD have been, the political opposition is actually divided in how to resolve the political crisis and challenge Aziz. Whereas the COD is calling for Aziz to step down, another opposition party, the *Alliance Populaire Progressite*, led by Messoud Boulkheir, president of the national assembly, is more open

⁵ Minorities at Risk, "Assessment for Black Moors in Mauritania," (<http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/assessment.asp?groupId=43502>)

⁶ "Mauritania 2012," *Freedom in the World 2012*, (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2012/mauritania>).

⁷ BBC, "Mauritania Anti-Slave Activist Biram Obeid Charged," May 31, 2012 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18282569>)

⁸ Ahmed Ould Jedou, "Mauritania: Dreaming about the Fall of the Military State," *African Futures*, Social Science Research Council, September 18, 2012 (<http://forums.ssrc.org/african-futures/2012/09/18/mauritania-dreaming-about-the-fall-of-the-military-state/>).

⁹ National Democratic Institute, "Mauritania Election Bulletin," Issue No. 1, July 16 – July 31, 2011, p. 2. (<http://www.ndi.org/Mauritania-election-bulletin>)

¹⁰ Anouar Boukhars, "The Drivers of Insecurity in Mauritania," *The Carnegie Papers* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2011) p. 10.

to dialogue with the president. The tense political climate is further exacerbated by a legitimacy crisis in Mauritania's legislature and senate, whose mandate expired in October and April 2011 (new election dates are yet to be scheduled), and divisions in the ruling *Union pour la République*, who believe they are not getting "their fair share" of public spoils.

Following Aziz's "accidental" shooting in October 2012, the COD and other members of the opposition revived calls for a transition government, while he convalesced in a Paris hospital, insisting that he was incapable of leading.¹¹ Aziz has forcefully pushed back against suggestions of his inability to govern while recovering in France, detailing his frequent interactions with members of his government.¹² Still, Aziz remains in Paris for medical care (although he returned to Nouakchott for a few days during the independence celebrations in November).

In cases where institutions are weak, as in Mauritania, individuals make a difference in defusing political tension. In Mauritania's personalized politics, the power to direct the course of events lies in President Aziz; Messoud Boulkheir, the leader of the national assembly; and Ahmed Ould Daddah, the leader of the opposition *Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques*. Each of these stakeholders, however, is not expected to stem the worsening of the political crisis. Boulkheir has attempted to bring the ruling party and the opposition together, but as noted above, the opposition is severely divided. Another potentially unifying figure, Ould Daddah, has been tainted by too many ethically questionable scandals to provide credible leadership, according to the roundtable experts. Mr. Aziz's governing style also prevents any reconciliation. In particular, Aziz had displayed an inability or unwillingness to recognize the existing political crisis. He governs with an abrasive and non-consultative style, which renders politics unpredictable and non-transparent. Experts agreed that it is difficult to understand how decisions are made in the Aziz government. Moreover, Aziz might be more intransigent and distrustful now, after the shooting; despite its public characterization as an accident, Aziz is more focused than ever on "coup-proofing." Even so, it is not clear what more Aziz can do. His supporters already occupy key government and military positions.

¹¹ Lissnup, « Mauritania Opposition reject Mali intervention, » December 18, 2012; *AfriqueJet.com*, "Mauritania: President Aziz Reassures Countrymen: 'I am well'" 2012 (http://www.afriquejet.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1515:mauritania-president-aziz-reassures-countrymen-i-am-well&catid=2:news&Itemid=111).

¹² Jeuneafrique, "Mauritanie - Ould Abdelaziz: "Je n'ai jamais Redouté de Coup d'Etat," December 17, 2012 (http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2709p050_051.xml0/france-afrique-mali-oppositionmauritanie-ould-abdelaziz-je-n-ai-jamais-redoute-de-coup-d-tat.html)

The Failure of the Dakar Accord

The opposition is particularly critical of the failure to implement the 2009 Dakar Accord. Signed on June 2, 2009 in Dakar, the agreement paved the way for a resolution of the political impasse that resulted from the August 2008 coup by Aziz. Under the agreement, a government of national unity would be formed, and deposed president Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi would be required to step aside. Elections were to be scheduled within one month; the representatives of Independent Electoral Commission were to comprise equally members of the ruling party and of the opposition. Finally, former Prime Minister Yahya Ould Ahmed El Waghef, who had spent the previous eight months in jail, was released.

The Dakar accord called for an inclusive dialogue between the government and the opposition, following the elections.¹³ This never took place. The Mauritania experts at the roundtable noted that Aziz felt contempt for the other signatories and that he did not think he owed anything to them or anybody else. He felt no compunction to honor the Dakar accord. Facilitating this abrogation was the apparent cooptation by some members of the opposition, further weakening the Dakar agreement.

Mauritania and Its Neighbors

Mauritania does not seem to have particularly close relations with its neighbors or with the continental organizations. As a result, Mauritania is not likely to interfere in others' affairs or welcome any attempts by others to resolve its political crises. Many of these relationships are based on Aziz's personal evaluation of leaders. For example, relations with Morocco are poor because of Aziz's perceived slight suffered when Morocco's King Mohammed VI refused to receive him. In retaliation, Aziz, turned to Algeria. But the Algeria relationship must be managed, relative to the other countries in the region; therefore, Aziz has been careful not to show support of the Polisario Front, which has been backed by Algeria in its quest to liberate the western Sahara from Moroccan administrative control.

Of course, Mali's instability, including the manner in which the region should respond, is the most important foreign policy issue facing Mauritania. On this point, it seems there is some consensus across the political spectrum: Mauritania should not intervene militarily in Mali. Although Boulkheir seemed more open to intervention,¹⁴ the

¹³ Accord Cadre de Dakar entre le trois Grands pole Politiques Mauritanien (http://www.tv5.org/cms/chaine-francophone/info/Les_dossiers_de_la_redaction/p-3787-Mauritanie_les_accords_de_Dakar.htm).

¹⁴ StarAfrica "Mauritania warns of fallout from Mali Crisis," *StarAfrica.com* November 12, 2012 (http://en.starafrika.com/news/mauritania-warns-of-fallout-from-mali-cr-260730.html).

COD issued a statement on December 18 reaffirming their stance against an intervention in Mali¹⁵ and Aziz had concurred as well.¹⁶



Aziz’s reluctance to intervene in Mali is personal, reflecting concerns for domestic politics and his own political survival. The experts at the roundtable reported that Aziz might fear that intervening in Mali could exacerbate racial tensions at home. Aziz sees the situation in Mali in racial terms: the lighter-skinned Tuaregs have come under assault by the black-skinned southern Malians. With Mauritania’s Black/Haratine becoming more radicalized in their opposition to the government, some fear that intervening in Mali will cause further social discord in Mauritania. There is also little appetite among the military elite to intervene in Mali. And given Aziz’s heightened concern for “coup-proofing,” he is not likely to deploy the army into an unpopular intervention. Furthermore, relations between Mali and Mauritania are poor, since Aziz was offended with Mali’s President Amadou Toumani Touré’s refusal to recognize his 2008 coup. Thus, as long as the Tuaregs do not cross into western Mauritania, Aziz is not likely to intervene.

¹⁵ Lissnup, «Mauritania Opposition reject Mali intervention,» December 18, 2012.

¹⁶ Jeuneafrique, “Mauritanie - Ould Abdelaziz: *“Je n’ai jamais Redouté de Coup d’Etat,”* December 17, 2012 (http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2709p050_051.xml0/france-afrique-mali-oppositionmauritanie-ould-abdelaziz-je-n-ai-jamais-redoute-de-coup-d-tat.html).

The Year Ahead

2013 will be a very significant year for internal politics in Mauritania, the experts agreed. Mauritania remains volatile and uncertain. Any one of the opposition rallies can escalate into violence. This situation is exacerbated by Aziz's impulsiveness and lack of consultation. Still, with the opposition badly divided on how to react against Aziz (i.e., should he leave office or should there be a dialogue?), it is unlikely that violence will be widespread or sustained. More likely, the Mauritanian security forces will be engaged in putting out pockets of unrest. It is similar to methods they have used in the past two years.

The low probability of widespread, sustained violence does not discount the depth of disenfranchisement or dissent among the public, but rather illustrates the difficulty the radical opposition might have in organizing a violent popular protest against the government. Underscoring Mauritania's fragility, analyst Jay Uffelder, who predicted Mali's coup d'état, has listed Mauritania as number 5 on his 2013 "Coup-Forecast" list.¹⁷ Indeed, coup-plotters could find that they have support among Mauritians – once the coup happens. But Aziz seems to have put his supporters in place to avoid a coup. More likely is a revival of the discussion for a transitional government – especially in the event that Aziz's stay in France continues beyond what many consider reasonable. In this case too, with Aziz's supporters in place in key positions, including the military, this idea will not likely gain traction. Instead, low intensity protests and some violence will likely continue until the next round of elections in 2016.

¹⁷ Dart-throwing Chimp, "Coup Forecast 2013," Dart-Throwing Chimp Blog, December 21, 2012 (<http://dartthrowingchimp.wordpress.com/2012/12/21/coup-forecasts-for-2013/>).

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