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Mauritania's Military Coup: Domestic Implications and Regional Challenges

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The August 6th military takeover in Mauritania brought to a halt an 18-month old democratization process, dashing hopes that Mauritania had overcome its historic political and social shortcomings and was emerging as a more stable, civilian-run country. Situated on Northwest Africa's Atlantic coast, Mauritania - one of the world's poorest countries - suffers from a host of socio-economic ills, which have affected its development since attaining independence in 1962. These include a population of 3 million, consisting primarily of an Arab elite dominating a largely Black African underclass; an unstable political system; and a failing economy with limited resources. In recent years, Mauritania has strengthened its ties with the West (including maintaining full diplomatic relations with Israel), and is recognized in Washington and EU capitals as an ally in confronting the rising specter of Islamist-oriented terrorism across North Africa.

Although Mauritania has a long history of military takeovers, this latest coup differed from previous ones. It forcibly removed a president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, who had been elected in orderly and transparent elections in March 2007 and thus enjoyed international legitimacy and, at least initially, domestic legitimacy as well. Although the military command that staged the coup argued that it had acted to "save the country", its motives were primarily sectoral, stemming from the unmet needs and demands of frustrated military commanders at odds with the government.

Background to the Coup: Abdallahi's Presidency

The presidential elections had been the culmination of an unprecedented democratization process championed by military officers who had risen to power in August 2005. This group, which had ousted the widely reviled regime of Muhammad Ould Taya, kept its promise to reconfigure Mauritania's political system and manage the country's transition to democracy. After successfully overseeing municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections, the officers receded from public life and pledged not to interfere with the country's newly elected government. Abdallahi's experience as a former minister and in other lower level administrative positions, along with a broad base of support among various political, social and tribal groups, had formed the basis of his appeal and appeared to inaugurate the beginning of a new

political era for Mauritania.

However, as the euphoria that surrounded the elections diminished, the new government confronted an array of political, social, and economic challenges that would have humbled a far more experienced administration. Abdallahi was well aware of the public's high expectations of the new government. While pledging to do his best to ameliorate living conditions, he also cautioned that there were no quick remedies to Mauritania's problems. The two most immediate issues facing him were the need to strengthen democratic institutions and reinforce national unity. To that end, the government reached out to opposition parties by offering them expanded opportunities to voice their opinions and directly engage with the government. At the same time, Abdallahi's followers established a new party, the National Pact for Democracy and Development (PNDD). On social issues, the government enacted forceful legislation aimed at eradicating slavery from the country's social landscape (the practice was officially abolished in 1981 but is still widely prevalent). It also initiated a repatriation process for black Mauritians driven from the homes into neighboring Senegal in April 1989.

Despite these accomplishments, negative developments overshadowed the government's efforts. The sudden worldwide rise in food prices had a direct impact on Mauritania, which imports over 70% of its food supplies. Impoverished Mauritanian citizens, finding it increasingly difficult to purchase basic food items, became angry over what they perceived as an inadequate governmental response to the problem. Disappointing levels of oil production, which Mauritania had recently begun to generate, compounded the public's unhappiness. In addition, emerging radical Islamist terrorism, inspired and linked to foreign *jihadi* movements and displayed in the December 2007 murder of four French tourists, cast a shadow across a society whose common political and religious identity remained tenuous.

Looming in the background was the Mauritanian military. Although it pledged to refrain from political involvement, Mauritians quickly found reason to question the government's degree of independence, and whether it was not beholden to military interests. Abdallahi repeatedly denied the existence of military involvement in governmental affairs, but observers pointed to the presence of several military commanders in public life, particularly General Muhammad Ould Abd al-Aziz, the commander of the presidential guard.

During recent months, Abdallahi undertook a number of steps to bolster his position. In May, seeking to appease critics of his government's inept reaction to economic and other concerns, he reshuffled the cabinet and altered its profile. The new cabinet was comprised of political figures representing various parties, in contrast to the outgoing one whose members were largely unaffiliated technocrats lacking political experience. This shift was expected to help crystallize political parties' support for the government, and thus bolster its domestic political standing. But the new government found it difficult to assert itself, and within a month faced a no-confidence vote in the Mauritanian parliament. In an effort to thwart the appeal of Islamist groups, Abdallahi's administration introduced measures intended to strengthen the country's Islamic identity, such as establishing Friday as the official day of rest. But the government's most difficult challenge was with the military.

Growing Government-Military Tension: The Army Assumes Control

The lack of democratic traditions in Mauritania loomed over the issue of civil-military relations. The fact that Abdallahi was an elected president not appointed by the army nor in possession of a military background, proved to be a difficult adjustment for some military officials. Although the leaders of the 2005 coup had kept their promise to withdraw from public life and allow the elected government to function, other officers were increasingly impatient with the government. Abdallahi denied any military pressure, but observers repeatedly pointed to General Abd al-Aziz's threatening personality. There were further reports that over the year Abd al-Aziz had raised financial and other demands related to his personal benefit. Some military officials were also apparently angry over Abdallahi's efforts to reach out to Islamist elements in society.

Aware of their threatening posture, Abdallahi announced the dismissal of four military commanders, including Abd al-Aziz. Hours later, military units led by Abd al-Aziz took control in a bloodless *coup d'etat*. Troops seized Abdallahi and other officials, and announced the establishment of a new "Mauritanian State Council". Soldiers patrolled the streets of the capital, Nouakchott, and national television and radio temporarily went off the air. The coup leaders announced that they would appoint a new government, issue a decree formalizing their powers, and enable other state institutions, including the parliament, to continue operating. In an effort to appease expected international criticism, they also declared that their control would be temporary, until the holding of new elections.

Foreign Criticism and Outlook for the Future

Nonetheless, international condemnation of the coup was swift and forceful. The European Union stated that it would reconsider a planned aid package, while the U.S. noted that the coup had been carried out against a democratically elected, constitutional government. Seeking to pressure the new regime, the U.S. suspended most of its aid to Mauritania, with France following suit. A UN envoy also called for an immediate return to constitutional rule. The strongest diplomatic reaction came from the African Union, which suspended Mauritania's membership in the 53-member regional organization and demanded Abdallahi's return to power.

Indeed, the coup in Mauritania posed another dilemma for African leaders, who were already in search of a united policy towards non-democratic regimes on the continent. Although there is little sympathy among African leaders for the Mauritanian coup, their ability to take a tough approach against the new military regime is limited. Given their current reluctance to intervene in more pressing matters such as the crisis in Zimbabwe, a multilateral African intervention in Mauritania on behalf of the deposed leadership is thus highly unlikely.

Over a week after the coup, Mauritania's new leaders appear to be in full control. There appears to be little danger of a counter-coup, and with Abdallahi still in custody, there is also no political figurehead around whom potential opposition could

rally. The military junta has appointed a prime minister, indicating that it intends to quickly move beyond Abdallahi's presidency. Under these circumstances, the prospects for a democratic Mauritania, once deemed promising, have dimmed.

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