

The Military Coup in Mauritania: Domestic and International Implications

By Daniel Zisenwine
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The August 3 bloodless military coup in Mauritania that removed president Maaouiya Ould Taya from power took place in one of the world's most impoverished nations, situated on Africa's northwest coast between Arab North Africa and black sub-Saharan Africa. The coup had all the familiar trappings of an African military overthrow of a corrupt and detested civilian regime.

Mauritania has supported the American-led war on terror and actively supports Washington's counterterrorist and training operations in the trans-Sahara region. It is also among only three Arab League members (along with Egypt and Jordan) that maintain full diplomatic relations with Israel. As Mauritania's new leaders seek to stabilize their authority, they are likely to come under considerable pressure from local opposition forces opposed to existing pro-American policies and its links with Israel.

Background to the Coup

Since forcibly assuming power in 1984, Taya maintained a harsh, authoritarian regime. While the government had held several presidential and legislative elections over the years, Mauritania was a far cry from a working democracy, as elections were designed merely to legitimize Taya's grip on power. One of the major opposition parties, Action for Change, was banned in January 2002, while the Taya regime's affiliated party, the Democratic and Social Republican Party, effectively turned Mauritania into a one-party state.

The government had pledged to reduce poverty and improve the health and education systems, but the country's estimated 3 million citizens continue to live in miserable material conditions. Severe drought plagued the country. The economy was hobbled by foreign debt, though that debt is to be wiped out as part of the African debt initiative adopted at the G8 summit in July. Recent discovery of offshore oil reserves (whose production is expected to begin in 2006 at 75,000 barrels a day) will change the financial situation of this heretofore poverty-stricken nation.

In an effort to gain international support, the Mauritanian government realigned its diplomatic orientation in the mid-1990s, discarding ties with Saddam Hussein's Iraq and strengthening its relations with the United States. In addition, Taya's regime established diplomatic relations with Israel, ignoring vehement criticism voiced by Libya and disregarding domestic protests led by local Islamist groups. Mauritania even defied an Arab League resolution calling for cutting ties with Israel following the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada in October 2000. Israel, for its part, tendered Mauritania assistance in the healthcare field and in other areas, along with diplomatic support in international organizations. Israeli foreign minister Sylvan Shalom visited Mauritania this spring, underscoring the country's importance in Israel's eyes. Opposition groups protested the visit, but they failed to alter the Mauritanian government's stand.

Staging the Coup, Consolidating Power

Many Mauritians in recent years were critical of Taya's repressive policies, portraying him as a brutal dictator and calling for his removal from power. Several failed attempts to overthrow the regime reflected the government's precarious position. President Taya's early August trip to Saudi Arabia, where he participated in Saudi King Fahd's funeral, set the stage for the *coup d'etat*.

Col. Ely Ould Muhammad Vall, Taya's security chief and close colleague, led the takeover, suggesting that that the coup was less of an ideological revolution than a protest against Taya's imperious conduct. Similarly, the appointment of Sidi Muhammad Ould Boubacar (Mauritania's ambassador to France) as prime minister hinted that the new regime was interested in maintaining policy continuity. The new rulers announced that the "Military Council for Justice and Democracy" would hold power for no more than two years and organize free and fair elections for a successor government.

While domestic reaction to the coup was publicly favorable, foreign reaction was not. The African Union suspended Mauritania's membership following the coup, demanding that the country restore "constitutional order." The United States noted that it opposed any attempts to change governments through extraconstitutional or violent means, and France expressed its concern as well. The Arab League issued a more neutral statement, emphasizing the need "to respect the people's will." In an effort to secure international support, Colonel Vall met with foreign ambassadors in the capital, Nouakchott, assuring them that the international community had nothing to fear from the new regime, and that no changes were expected in Mauritania's foreign policy. The United States has opened talks with leaders of the military coup, although it has not officially recognized the country's new government.

Islamist Extremism in Mauritania

Mauritania has witnessed a rise of Islamist religious and political currents in recent years. Some Islamist groups function more as charitable associations; the best known of them is Jema'at al-dawa wal-tabligh. Several others are identified with the fundamentalist Wahhabi (or Salafi) doctrine and are more politically oriented. These groups are not inherently supportive of terrorist activity, although some of their ideological components lend themselves to such causes. In light of former president Taya's repressive regime, they have emerged as local opposition forces.

Other Islamist groups, however, are foreign imports and less involved with local politics. These include groups linked to the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, itself considered an affiliate of al-Qaeda, which openly preaches violence against heretical regimes. Such groups have increased their activities in the Sahel region, a fertile training ground. Islamist-led terrorist action has flared up in the remote northeastern part of Mauritania, where a June attack by Islamists on Mauritanian military barracks killed fifteen soldiers. Although Mauritanian Islamists denied any involvement in the attack, government authorities cracked down on Islamist activity. Security forces searched and reportedly arrested clerics at several mosques funded by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Opposition groups criticized these actions, arguing that the regime was overstating the Islamist threat in order to enhance its reputation in the United States and obtain increased American aid.

Outlook for the Future

The new rulers will need to maneuver between competing domestic political forces. These efforts may complicate Mauritania's relations with foreign powers.

The new government in Nouakchott will have to tread carefully through diverse Islamist currents, distinguishing between violent foreign-based groups and nonviolent local political organizations that could participate in a future democratic process. The new government's release of twenty-one people, mostly Islamist activists, previously charged with plotting against the state may raise foreign concern over a rise in local Islamist influence. Meanwhile, a leading Mauritanian human-rights activist expressed his interest in distancing the country from its "harmful alliance" with the United States. Although Colonel Vall has expressed his commitment to Mauritania's existing foreign policy, he may find it difficult to pursue it, particularly if forced to placate rivaling political groups.

An American recognition of the coup would clash with Washington's declared opposition to the assumption of power by force. On the other hand, the United States cannot indefinitely ignore political reality, particularly in a region that harbors the potential for becoming a haven and training ground for Islamist extremists. Indeed, the United States recently began the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative, which is designed to help Saharan states develop the internal security forces necessary to control borders and combat crime and terrorism. The Mauritanian military leaders, as new beneficiaries of American attention and largesse, may not want to adopt an anti-American posture, at least for the time being. In that connection, they may also choose not to adopt an anti-Israeli posture.

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