

Electoral Processes and Change in Mauritania: From the Institutional to the Informal

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The years 2023 and 2024 have been characterized as election years, placing the spotlight on politics and the repositioning of political actors. The emergence of new parties, the disappearance of others,¹ and the alliances and fulfilled predictions regarding winners and losers all bear witness to the importance of elections for Mauritania.

On the one hand, the international context –and Mauritania’s role in it– erodes the legitimacy of the current President and favourite candidate for the presidential elections (currently set for 22 June 2024, although they could be pushed back to the 29th, due to the lunar calendar). The migration deal with the EU has sparked nationwide protests and a backlash against the signing of the treaty, which makes Mauritania the next link in the control of sub-Saharan migrant flows to Europe. On the other, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani’s role in the African Union, where he has adopted a negotiating and conciliatory profile, affords him a certain standing in the international arena and vis-à-vis the great powers of the Maghreb, Morocco and Algeria, which are increasingly competing for a hegemonic role in Africa and the Middle East. Although relations with these two countries are always difficult, they are currently going through

a good period with Algeria, as reflected in the construction of a road linking Tindouf to Zouerate.

Once again, migration and security are the only issues putting Mauritania on the political agendas of international powers. The distancing, if not confrontation, of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from “Western” countries and, in particular, France has made Mauritania a go-to partner in the search for stability in the Sahel.

June 2024 Presidential Elections

Although the countdown to the official start of the campaign for the presidential elections in late June 2024 has not formally begun, the political activity of the candidates and their parties is already hotting up. The 2023 local and legislative elections provided a “map” of where voters stand. The Insaf party² captured 107 of the 176 seats in play, followed by the Islamist Tawassoul party, which won only 11, and the Union for Democracy and Progress party, which took ten. In other words, the only electoral competition is between the opposition parties for the handful of seats left by the majority party, Insaf. Those elections were marked by the emergence of an opposition coalition of left-wing activists and human rights defenders around the Joud party³ (which won six seats in the last legislative elections, as a result of the clear decline of traditional opposition parties such as Ould Daddah’s

¹ Under Section 20 of the 2018 Parties Act, those parties that, in two consecutive municipal/legislative elections, obtain less than 1% of the vote will be dissolved. This was the case of the Republican Party for Democracy and Renewal (Ould Taya’s former party); the National Ribat Party for Rights and Generation Construction; the Burst of Youth for the Nation Movement Party (El-Hirak); and the Party for Construction and Progress (Hizb el Bina).

² The Insaf (Equity) party is the former Union for the Republic created by Abdel Aziz to run in the 2009 elections. It was reformed in 2022 and has undergone an interesting internal renewal to ensure control of the party by Ghazouani as opposed to the remaining loyalists from Abdel Aziz’s own party.

³ <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/mauritania/>.

Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD), Mohamed Ould Maouloud's Union of Progressive Forces (UFP) and Messaoud Ould Boulkheir's Progressive People's Alliance (APP). In April 2024, months before the presidential elections, the press reported on the progressive disintegration of this latter party, including the departure of some of its long-standing leaders, who were at odds with the leadership of Ould Boulkheir, who was heavily criticized for aligning himself with the regime's positions. As of early April, there are nine presidential candidates, highlighting the lack of a strong opposition coalition with a single candidate to challenge the current President of the republic and mitigate the high fragmentation of the political scene. Ghazouani won the previous elections, in 2019, securing 52% of the votes in the first round. The presidential elections use a two-round majority system. The runners up (at some distance) were the anti-slavery activist Biram Ould Abeid,⁴ who captured 19% of the vote, and Mohamed Ould Boubacar, the candidate backed by the Islamist party Tawassoul, who won 18% (Freedom House 2023).⁵ Analysts agreed on the importance of those elections, which were considered competitive as a candidate was chosen without military intervention. However, Ghazouani is a former general and defence minister under Ould Abdel Aziz, with whom he participated in the 2005 and 2008 coups. Ould Abdel Aziz currently remains under house arrest on charges of illicit enrichment and money laundering. Ould Ghazouani was the official candidate out of respect for the constitutional limit of two consecutive five-year terms. In April 2022, a new Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) was appointed, under pressure from the opposition parties to achieve greater representation, following a series of "dialogues," a strategy implemented by the government at various points in recent Mauritanian history with a view to bringing positions closer together prior to elections. Dah Abdel Jelil was appointed head of the Commission. For the 2023 elections, Insaf and some of the larger opposition parties signed a Charter of National Under-

standing, setting out principles of national unity and political and economic governance.

The Mauritanian political system is hampered by a serious contradiction between the perception of the elections as free and transparent and the perception of the regime as competitively authoritarian. The complaints voiced by NGOs and the national opposition focus on the persecution of journalists, human rights defenders, and activists who fight against slavery, for non-discrimination against the black Mauritanian population and for LGBT+ rights.

Migration and security are the only issues putting Mauritania on the political agendas of international powers

The official discourse from the presidency and the government had shown some sensitivity towards the situation of the Haratin population (with the 2022 approval of the Taazour plan to support the most vulnerable communities), slavery, discrimination against languages other than Arabic in the education system, and the state of poverty in the rural world (where only 15% of the population have access to sanitation facilities and 65% depend on agriculture and livestock for their survival, resulting in highly precarious living conditions).⁶ However, the measures needed to reverse this situation have not been adopted in this last presidential term.⁷ The education reform implemented in 2022 was very poorly received, once again, by the black Mauritanian population (Halpulaar, Wolof, Soninke and Bamana ethnic groups), as it excludes them from high offices in the government, army and politics. Black Mauritians also face discrimination in such important administrative and formal matters as the registry office and registering to vote. In fact, complaints by Hara-

⁴ In February 2024, he was stripped of his parliamentary immunity so that he could be tried, probably before the presidential elections. Voices both critical and supportive of Biram acknowledge that the conflict with the president of UFP may have been the trigger, as the latter has joined the government majority with RFD and Insaf. See: "Présidentielle 2024 : Le bal est ouvert." *Le Calame*, 6 March 2024. <http://lecalame.info/?q=node/15630>.

⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/mauritania/freedom-world/2023>.

⁶ BTI 2024 Country Report: Mauritania. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MRT>.

⁷ Ibid.

tin activists prompted the government to respond and, in June 2022, the director of the agency responsible for the population register, newly appointed in 2021, resigned.⁸

Natural Resources and Energy Potential

Mauritania's potential as a green hydrogen producer, the investments of international companies such as BP and Kosmos Energy in the Greater Tortue Ahemeyim natural gas project, and the vast amount of territory in the country suitable for wind and solar power generation make Mauritania a clean energy generator with enormous potential.⁹

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Its wealth of natural resources, such as iron ore, gold (production at the Tasiast mine is up 15% from the previous year and a solar power plant has been built to supply 22.5% of the mine's energy needs),¹⁰ and fisheries, its main sources of revenue (75% of the total in 2023) thanks to their export, depend on market fluctuations and do not compensate for the deficit in cereal imports, which account for 80% of national consumption. Uranium is emerging as another mineral to be mined, whose current market suggests that it, too, will become a significant source of income for the Mauritanian government.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/mauritania/>.

¹⁰ "Kinross annonce des résultats record pour 2023 grâce à la performance exceptionnelle de sa filiale Tasiasten Mauritanie." *Le quotidien de Nouakchott*, 4 March 2024. https://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=772953.

¹¹ In January 2024 alone, the Canary Islands received more than 7,000 people. OULD MOCTAR, Hassan. "The EU-Mauritania migration deal is destined to fail." *Al Jazeera*, 26 March 2024. www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/3/26/the-eu-mauritania-migration-deal-is-destined-to.

¹² In 2023, Mauritania received 55,000 people from Mali as a result of the instability in that country compared with 12,000 in 2022. *UNHCR Mauritania Factsheet March 2024*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/mauritania/unhcr-mauritania-factsheet-march-2024>.

¹³ Ibid.

However, energy production and exploitation of resources are unlikely to result in lasting growth for the country and its citizens as long as they continue to follow a pattern linked to extractivism and highly dependent on foreign capital.

Migration Deal

The focus in March was on the migration deal promoted by the EU, which included 210 million euros in funding to strengthen Mauritania's border management and shore up its security forces in their fight against illegal emigration. The treaty also provides funding for job creation, strengthening the asylum system and receiving legal immigration, within the initiatives formulated by the European Global Gateway programme. The agreement's clearest proponent has been Spain, which has to deal with the arrival of migratory flows via the Atlantic route, from Mauritania and Senegal to the Canary Islands.¹¹ The Spanish government has also pledged to increase funding for its cooperation policy with Mauritania.

In this context, little mention has been made of the migratory pressure experienced by Mauritania itself, especially from neighbouring Mali.¹² As a result of the outbreak of the domestic conflict in that country, which led to an attempt to split it in 2012, Mauritania has already taken in a large number of displaced Malians. The withdrawal of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) further exacerbated Mali's isolation and instability and the insecurity of its population. The Mauritanian region of Hodh Chargui, located in the southeast near the border with Mali, is home to some 181,000 Malians. Of these, around 99,000 are concentrated in the Mbera camp alone.¹³

Based on the main indicators included in the UNDP's Human Development Index reports, Mauritania ranks 158th out of 189 countries (poverty, low lit-

eracy rates, limited access to basic services and climate pressure).¹⁴ In other words, it is making an enormous effort to accommodate this displaced population, which consists of highly vulnerable refugees. A clear example of the instability on that border was the incursion by Malian military forces into Mauritanian territory (on 8 April), in which several Mauritanian civilians were killed. The government responded in its Council of Ministers, stating that it protects its borders and does not allow the murder of fellow citizens to go unpunished, but that the incident could have been a mistake due to geographical conditions.

The combination of this great influx of migrants from other African countries and the commitment with the EU to curb flows towards Europe seriously compromises Mauritania's domestic stability.

The signing of the migration deal with the EU has generated profound discontent among the country's own people, who see how this process of "outsourcing" border security policies clearly harms them and makes them the "gendarmes of Europe."¹⁵ The leader of the APP, Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, has

blatantly rejected the agreement, claiming it leaves Mauritania in the role of "Europe's rubbish bin, if not its slave."¹⁶

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A parallel world to the official one is spreading in Mauritania, from economic sectors, jobs and trade to political and religious activism itself. The creation of Sufi brotherhoods, reformist Islamic associations, local associations and small microcredit associations,¹⁷ outside the official circuits, provides an outlet for the demands and claims of a society that does not remain stagnant.

¹⁴ https://executiveboard.wfp.org/document_download/WFP-0000154825.

¹⁵ OULD MOCTAR, Hassan. "The EU-Mauritania migration deal is destined to fail." *Al Jazeera*, 26 March 2024. www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/3/26/the-eu-mauritania-migration-deal-is-destined-to.

¹⁶ CRIDEM, "Le nouveau partenariat, qui lie la Mauritanie et l'UE, en matière de migration, « fait de la Mauritanie la poubelle de l'UE » (APP)." 11 March 2024. https://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=773150.

¹⁷ BTI 2024 Country Report: Mauritania. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MRT>.