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MAURITANIA: PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTIONS 2014: LEGITIMACY,
PROMISES AND BOYCOTT

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MAURITANIA: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2014: LEGITIMACY, PROMISES AND BOYCOTT

Abstract:

On June 21st, 2014, the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (IRM) held presidential elections. The consolidation of power and the pursuit of a greater legitimacy of the IRM's current President, the electoral promises and the boycott of all opposition parties, have set up the development and the outcome of the aforementioned elections.

These elections reinforce the legitimacy and power of the current IRM's President, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, clear winner thereof, against four opponents with a low political profile.

In this document, we analyze the role of electoral actors and their proposals, the effects of the boycott of Mauritanian political parties and the election results that will configure the IRM's political future in the following five years.

Resumen:

El día 21 de junio de año 2014, se celebraron elecciones presidenciales en la República Islámica de Mauritania (RIM). La consolidación en el poder y la búsqueda de una mayor legitimidad del actual Presidente de la RIM, las promesas electorales y el boicot de todos los partidos de la oposición, han configurado el desarrollo y el resultado de las mismas.

Estos comicios, vienen a reforzar la legitimidad y el poder del actual Presidente de la RIM, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz claro ganador de los mismos, ante cuatro rivales de bajo perfil político.

Analizamos en este trabajo el papel de los actores electorales y sus propuestas, los efectos del boicot de los partidos políticos mauritanos y los resultados electorales que configurarán el devenir político de la RIM en los próximos cinco años.

***NOTE:** The ideas included in the **Opinion Documents** are responsibility of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the thought of the IEEE (Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies) or the Ministry of Defence.

Keywords: Elections, Mauritania, legitimacy, turnout, expectations.

Palabras clave: Elecciones, Mauritania, legitimidad, participación, expectativas.

INTRODUCTION

The Mauritanian electoral sociology predicted that the current President of the IRM, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, and the Political Party that supports him, Union for the Republic (UPR), after broadly winning the municipal and legislative elections at the end of 2013¹, would obtain a wide support in these presidential elections, an easy re-election according to political analysts. It appeared he would win these elections in the first round—as has happened—after obtaining 81.89 % of the votes.

The absence of nearly all the political opposition in the election day; the low political profile of the majority of the electoral competitors to the current president; the boycott of the elections by the parties of the National Forum for Democracy and Unity (FNDU), which represent 17 political parties, 10 trade union confederations, and dozens of organizations, and that did not present any candidate; the contention and inactivity of the Islamist Party Tewassoul in these elections and the impressive economic means and omnipresent electoral propaganda the current president of the IRM has had at his disposal, have resulted in the re-election of Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz by a wide majority, showing once again that the Mauritanian electoral sociology is still marked by a cult of strong man.

The pre-electoral environment was marked by the negotiations between the Mauritanian executive and the opposition parties united under the National Forum for Democracy and Unity (FNDU), the latter demanding the formation of a government of national unity that would monitor the vote and denouncing its lack of “guarantees of transparency.”

ELECTORAL ACTORS

Five candidates ran in these presidential elections: the outgoing president, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz; the leader of the moderate opposition group El Wiam, Boidiel Ould Houmeit; the president of a popular formation among the black African peoples, Ibrahima Moctar Sarr; the anti-slavery leader, Biram Dah Abeid, and the only female candidate for the elections, Lalla Meryem Mint Moulaye Idriss.

¹ The UPR of the President Abdel Aziz obtained an absolute majority with 75 seats of a total of 147 of the National Assembly (Lower Chamber of the Parliament). In the municipal elections, the UPR won 154 of a total of 218 municipal Councils of the country, among them 5 out of 9 of the important municipal Councils of the capital, Nouakchott, in addition to the municipal Council of Nouadhibou, the second most important city of the country. Newspaper Le Monde. Digital edition. Available at: http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2013/12/23/mauritanie-le-parti-presidentiel-obtient-une-majorite-absolue-de-deputes_4338842_3212.html

Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, current president of the IRM², was suggested by the Union for the Republic (UPR), the party that backs him. It should be recalled that Abdel Aziz came to power through a coup d'état on August 8th, 2008, overthrowing the democratic government of President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, resigning from his mandate in April 2009 to run as a candidate in the presidential elections of July of the same year, becoming the winner. At the age of 58 years old, these elections are the second presidential ones he runs for. He has controlled the Mauritanian policy since 2005 and, in 2009, he created his own political party, the Union for the Republic, the winner of the legislative elections of 2013 after obtaining 75 seats out of a total of 146.

For the current president, Abdel Aziz, the elections of June 21st were central to consolidate his internal legitimacy and to establish his international presence. This was the chance for President Abdel Aziz to guarantee enough participation of the opposition and a high participation of voters in order to leave no doubts as to his mandate and legitimacy. The war against poverty was the key message of his electoral campaign of 2009; in the current elections, the core promise of his discourse focuses on new opportunities for youth under the slogan "A new impetus for Mauritania."

Ibrahima Moctar Sarr, President of the Party AJD/MR, Alliance for Justice and Democracy/Movement for Renewal. A journalist by profession, he repeated for the third time as candidate for presidential elections in Mauritania. He was candidate in the elections held in 2007 (7.95 % of the votes) and 2009 (4.57 % of the votes). His electoral discourse is focused on reestablishing the rights of equality and justice of the black African Mauritanian. He obtained 4 deputies in the legislatures of 2013 and he represents the interests of the black African population. He is the only candidate belonging to the black community of the south, denouncing the marginalization of this community against the domination of the Arab-Berbers.

Boidiel Ould Houmeit, President of the party called El Wiam, member of the former executive of president Maouya Sid'Ahemd Taya, has based his electoral campaign on highlighting the importance of the strengthening of the industrial development, the improvement of living conditions and the criticism of racism, emphasizing the failure of the

² President Abdel Aziz has combined the support to the Islamic religion with a tight control of the Islamic movement that shakes the Sahel, being an important ally of the West against Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Wordpress Pasaporte Electoral. Available at:
<http://pasaporteelectoral.wordpress.com/2014/06/24/elecciones-en-mauritania-aziz-logra-una-facil-reeleccion/>

use of coups d'état. Born in Trarza, a southwest region of the country, this ex-civil servant leading El Wiam has always been seen as a close partner of any party in power.

Biram Dah Abeid is the country's most famous activist against slavery. He was awarded the United Nations Human Rights Prize in 2013. President of IRA, the anti-slavery movement, he has once again focused his discourse on combating racism, corruption and bad governance. Haratin, human rights activist and descendant of slaves, centers its electoral promises in the fight against social domination and inequalities³.

Lalla Meryem Mint Moulaye Idriss, ex-member of President Taya's cabinet. Lalla Meryem has been the second woman to run for presidential elections in the IRM. Women represent 20 per cent of the popularly-elected posts. She is part of the editorial board of the Mauritanian news agency AMI. She promises to fight for appeasing the growing impoverishment of the country and the rise of prices.

In these presidential elections, the running of the candidature of the President of the Islamic Party Tewassoul, Mohamed Jamil Manssur, was expected, with its always highlighted capacities in the organizational field, huge financing, its presence in the media and the huge resources it has⁴, but finally Tewassoul defended the same position as the rest of the opposition Parties, and even it chose to maintain a more cautious approach in its criticism of the Mauritanian executive, due to the government's prohibition on March 8th of the Association "Al Mustaqbal", Mauritania's most important Islamic organization.

Despite its opposition to this ban, Tewassoul did not exercise, at any time, its great mobilization capacity and its huge resources with the aim of challenging the current President, for fear of a suspension and loss of its position as the biggest party of the parliamentary opposition⁵.

³ In a country where slavery specially affects children and women, this issue has a special social significance; despite slavery was abolished in 1905, it was not criminalized until 2007.

⁴ The Islamic Party Tewassoul, with its always highlighted capacities in the organizational field, huge financing, its presence in the media and the huge resources it has, is the owner of an information agency (Al-Akhbar), a newspaper (Al-Akhbar Info), a satellite television channel "Mahadra"—solely devoted to teach the Koranic precepts,— a TV channel (Al Mourabitoune)—propriety of the media group "Essiraj", which offers newsletters for three hours in the frequency of satellite Arabsat. These media have tried hard in showing "a Government unable to protect the sacred symbols of religion."

⁵ The Mauritanian Government disbanded on March 7th the Association "Al Mustaqbal" with the accusation that some media belonging to a political party (Tewassoul) had pulled out all the stops in order to foment unrest. The Islamic association "Mustaqbal" (The Future), whose Executive Director, Mohamed Yeslem Ould Mafduh, had to close down premises devoted to preaching, culture and teaching activities, and two medical dispensaries. Mustaqbal has as a leader sheikh Shaykh Mohamd Hacen Ould el Dedew, considered to be a

With regard to the long-serving opponent Ahmed Ould Daddah, president of the Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD), he did not change his decision of boycotting the electoral process, as he did in the last legislative and municipal elections.



Ballot paper for the Presidential elections of the IRM, 2014

THE ELECTION DAY

The electoral campaign of the presidential elections started on June 6th and ended at midnight of Friday, 20th.

spiritual reference of the country's Islamic Party, Tewassoul. Based on Law No. 098/64. Law No. 098/64 modified Law No. 7 dated January 23rd, 1973, by which an association can be disbanded through a decision motivated by the Minister of Interior when "leads to armed demonstrations or, without being armed, threatens the public order and the security with the aim of damaging the common interest, that receives funds from abroad in order to prejudice the common interest, that, by being part of approved organizations, adopts the form of battle groups or private militias or for messaging hostile propaganda to the nation or that could act against the territorial integrity, or try to forcibly change the nature of the republican government." It should be recalled that the Association was closed by the government on March 6th after the issue of desecration of Koran in a mosque of the capital, Nouakchott, and its later orchestrated demonstration by Tewassoul in which a demonstrator died near the presidential palace.

On June 21st, at 7:00 (local time), 2,957 polling stations—distributed over the whole country—were opened, 55 of them assigned to the Armed and Security Forces and 23 polling stations located abroad, officially closing at 19:00 hours. Members of the Armed Forces and Police voted one day before in order to guarantee the development of the elections for the rest of the country's citizens during the polling day. The elections were conducted without remarkable incidents and were described as “normal” by observers of the African Union, the League of Arab States, and neighboring countries like Morocco, Algeria and Niger. A mission of 46 observers of the African Union, led by the former Tunisian minister Béji Caïd Essebsi, was present in the elections, being distributed in thirteen regions: Nouakchott, Trarza, Inchiri, Nouadhibou, Brakna, Gorgol, Assaba, Guidimaka, Hodh El Gharbi, Hodh Ech Chargui, Tagant, Adrar y Zemmour⁶. The Ambassador of France in Mauritania, Hervé Besancenot, affirmed that the European Union would not send observers to the presidential elections. Nevertheless, the EU sent three experts for evaluating their development.

For those supporting the candidate for president, Abdel Aziz, the boycott of elections would not have significant effects, recalling that the participation rate in the legislative and municipal elections of last December 2013 achieved 75 %, despite the boycott of a big part of the opposition.

In the middle of the polling day, the spokesperson of the outgoing president, Husein Ould Ahmed Hadi, said that the turnout figures were between 42 % and 48 % and he highlighted that the definitive participation rate would exceed 70 %.

For President Abdel Aziz, these elections meant “to break the monopoly of obsolete political groups whose ideas do not correspond to the reality of what is happening in the country.”⁷ For the remaining candidates, the polling day developed in a calm environment, in accordance with the pre-established rules and criteria, though some expressed reservations. Therefore, candidate Biram Dah denounced some irregularities in the elections of the day before by the members of the Armed Forces and Police, and a massive fraud that would have tarnished the presidential elections. Hence, on June 24th, he brought an action before the Constitutional Council against the election results⁸. On the other hand, candidate

⁶ Guinea Ecuatorial Press. Available at: <http://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticia.php?id=5311>

⁷ Translation by the translator. Periódico digital lainformacion.com. (Agencia EFE). Original version available at: http://noticias.lainformacion.com/politica/elecciones-locales/termina-la-primera-vuelta-presidencial-en-mauritania_WIBD5LmqnXz8tmpQeuy077/

⁸ “In these historic elections—which should lead to a real power switching and a true debate of ideas, a true confrontation of ideas and values—many irregularities, fraud, noncompliance with the rules, the morality to

Ibrahima Moctar Sarr, affirmed elections would not be “completely transparent” and called to establish “a reform of the ethnic situation.”⁹

In the few incidents of the polling day, the police detained a group of young opponents in Bassiknu, 1,200 kilometers east of capital Nouakchott, who were demonstrating against the electoral process and in the capital, several groups of young people tried to settle during the election day near the polling stations by using speakers against the elections, being kept away from the polling stations by the police.

THE BOYCOTT

In April, negotiations held between the National Forum for Democracy and Unity (FNDU) and the Mauritanian executive in order to organize by consensus the presidential elections finally failed. Discussions were definitely suspended when the presidential Decree was published, which announced the organization of the first round of voting for the presidential elections for June 21st, considered as a unilateral decision and, by claiming a delay in the presidential elections, the opposition parties declared a boycott to them.

The elections were boycotted by almost the whole opposition—regrouped in the National Forum for Democracy and Unity (FNDU). The FNDU, a group formed by 17 political parties, 10 syndical confederations, and dozens of organizations, organized a big demonstration on June 4th. The aim was to make their convening power visible in a show of strength and social mobilization, and to send to the national and international public opinion the reasons for the boycott of almost all the opposition political parties of the presidential elections of June 21st.

The FNDU continued with the protests and mobilizations, denouncing the government’s inability to provide minimal guarantees of electoral transparency, as well as the unilateral decision of moving on with the elections despite the collapse in the dialogue process with the opposition forces denouncing, as in the parliamentary and municipal elections of 2013, the “dictatorial” character of the policy of President Abdel Aziz and calling for boycotting the elections, which they considered “an electoral masquerade” organized in a “unilateral” way.

democracy, are unfortunately intermingled... We have lodged an appeal to the Constitutional Council.” Biram Dah Abeid dépose un recours auprès du Conseil constitutionnel. CRIDEM. Available at: http://www.cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=657707

⁹ Translation by the translator. CRIDEM Elecciones Presidenciales. Disponible en: <http://www.cridem.org/>



Polling station in the interior of the country (Photo: Elhourriya.net)

While the National Forum for Democracy and Unity (FNDU) denounced the rift in the political dialogue and accused the ruling majority of carrying out a unilateral reform of the electoral process, it reaffirmed their commitment to dialogue as the only way of creating a climate of confidence among the political interlocutors, and insisted on revising the constitution of the Constitutional Council, the elimination of the INEC and the commitment to neutrality of certain governmental agencies. In this way, the electoral process started to be seen in a context of political and social tensions where the president Abdel Aziz looked for a re-election that would legitimate his rise to power, facing at the same time the mistrust of the political opposition and a social front marked by the protests that denounce the ethnic marginalization, as—apart from the persistent problem of slavery that is still a political bargaining chip in the country—the public space is not open to ethnic groups such as the Soninké, Pulaar or Wolof.

These elections, which should provide a satisfactory solution to the country's political crisis, have taken place in a context of social tensions such as the brutal breaking up on May 4th of the demonstration of former Mauritanian refugees, an act firmly condemned by local organizations of the civil society. These refugees, mainly black Mauritanian, protested against their living conditions and the failure to comply with a series of commitments undertaken by the authorities in the process of acquisition of documents and the return of lands to the former haratins deportees, accusing the government of not fulfilling the terms of the tripartite agreement signed in 2007 with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Senegal. This agreement was the base for the

return to their country of 25,000 black Mauritanian, who were collateral victims of the conflict that erupted between the Senegalese farmers and breeders in 1988.

THE RESULTS

According to the Mauritanian electoral system, the President of the Republic must be elected by absolute majority through a two-round system to serve a 5-year term. Since 2006, the presidential mandates are for 5 years, with a limit of two mandates and a maximum age of 75 years old. Therefore, Aziz faced its second and last mandate if the Constitution is not reformed.

As all analysts predicted, the current President Abdel Aziz won in the first round of the elections with 81.9 % of the votes, followed by Biram Dah Abeid with 8.7 %, Boidiel Ould Houmeit with 4.5 %, Ibrahim Moctar Sarr with 4.4 %, and Lalla Meryem with 0.5 %. If no candidate would have attained 50 % of the votes, a second round would have been held on the next July 5th. Mauritania is a presidential regime, so the President plays a key, determinant role in the politics of the country. These elections have lacked of big rivals and, hence, a certain victory was predicted.

Turnout has been low, 56.5 %, if we take into account that the turnout in the municipal and parliamentary elections of 2013 stood at 75.53 % in the first round and a turnout of 72 % in the second round. The lack of an authentic political rivalry with major candidates that would come up against the current President and the call for a boycott by FDNU have both had an influence in the record voter turnout.

The observers of the African Union and the Arab League highlighted the normality of the polling day, even if the opposition that supported the boycott has denounced a massive electoral fraud once more¹⁰. The European Union, in its communiqué of June 25th, stressed again the importance of an inclusive electoral process where the different political factions assure a credible and democratic result, while congratulating the elected President Abdel Aziz¹¹.

¹⁰ Wordpress. Available at: <http://pasaporteelectoral.wordpress.com/2014/06/24/elecciones-en-mauritania-aziz-logra-una-facil-reeleccion/>

¹¹ Bruxelles, le 25 juin 2014 140625/01 D É C L A R A T I O N du porte-parole sur les élections présidentielles en République Islamique de Mauritanie " Nous adressons nos félicitations au Président Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz pour sa réélection lors du premier tour des élections présidentielles du 21 juin. Nous saluons également l'organisation et le déroulement pacifique du processus électoral. Nous soulignons l'importance d'un processus électoral aussi inclusif que possible, permettant l'expression la plus complète des différents courants politiques, afin d'assurer un résultat transparent et crédible, et la légitimité démocratique des institutions.



Regarding the specific legal system that has regulated the current electoral process, it is established by the Organic Law No. 2012-027 on the establishment of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI, in its French acronym), Organic Law No. 2012-027 of April 12th, 2012, which is permanent, consensus-based, and it has, under the law of all powers in electoral matters, the

Decree No. 2012-117, as regards the terms of appointment of the members of the executive of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) committee and the extensive electoral Code, which contains a wide regulation that governs the whole electoral process of which some are notable examples: the Ordinance No. 91-027 of October 7th, 1991, Organic Law relating to the election of the President of the Republic—modified by Law 2012-028 of 12 April 2012—and the Decree No. 2012-278 of December 17th, 2012, which stipulates the procedure for the electoral campaigns and the voting processes in the Presidential elections¹².

The mission of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) is to prepare, organize, and supervise the whole electoral process of the validation phase of the electoral register until the announcement of the provisional results and their transfer to the Constitutional Council for their definitive proclamation in relation to the presidential elections and the referendum until the proclamation of other elections.

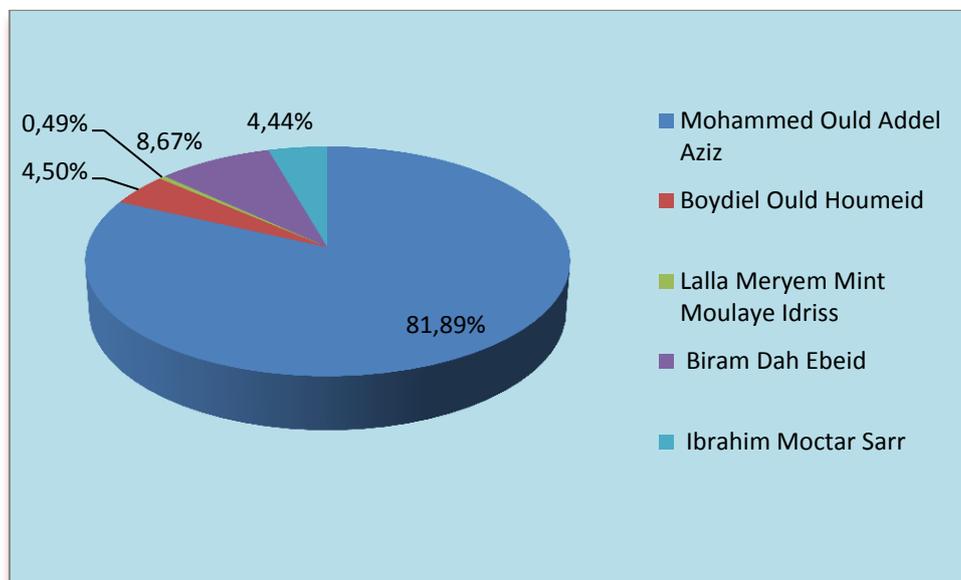
National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) announced, on Sunday night, the provisional results of the first round of the presidential elections.

L'Union européenne réaffirme sa disponibilité en vue de poursuivre une collaboration fructueuse avec le gouvernement mauritanien dans le but de contribuer à la démocratie, à la stabilité et au développement de la Mauritanie." Available at: http://www.eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/140625_01_fr.pdf.

¹² CENI. Available at : http://www.ceni.mr/spip.php?page=article&id_article=83

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Electoral roll	Number of voters	Spoiled ballot paper	Blank vote	Votes cast	Turnout
1,328,168	749,865	33,200	10,877	705,788	56.46%



Electoral results Presidential elections IRM 2014

Order of arrival of requests	Candidate	Number of votes	Percentage
1	Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz	577,995	81.89%
2	Boidiel Ould Houmeit	31,773	4.50%
3	Lalla Meryem Mint Moulaye Idriss	3,434	0.49%
4	Biram Dah Abeid	61,218	8.67%
5	Ibrahim Moctar Sarr	31,368	4.44%

CONCLUSIONS

Mauritanians voted on June 21st with more expectations than illusion, as the correspondent of *Le Monde* Charlotte Bozonnet pointed out, with confidence in a better future, because probably there is no other look with its lack of expectations in that blurred present of poverty and growing impoverishment, with that persistent absence of effective responses that should solve the daily problems of the Mauritanians, whose eyes fix in how democracy advance between the accepted rhythm imposed in the declaration “La Baule” in the year 1991, where the African countries embarked on a path of democratic reforms and where each country set the procedures and rhythms that best fitted them and the always watchful eye of the military.

The political future of the IRM in the next years should aim at allaying the growing impoverishment of the country and the rise in prices, to diversify the economy, and to give priority to the agricultural and livestock resources instead of the mining, where the Mauritanian citizens do not see real profits.

We must remain vigilant to how the problems are faced and which solutions are given to the rise of the Islamic political radicalism and to the ethnic tensions that are still a problem for the social development of the country. Therefore, efforts need to continue in the construction of a stronger national identity that could deactivate the ethnic and tribal lines that hinder the holding of the democratic elections and reforms, which barely affects the distribution of power and the organization of the social structure that is still based on tribal and ethnic parameters.

If legitimacy makes any government or system of government last, it is important to take into account that the stability of power in Mauritania would only be permanent if it admits a clear, plural political and civic participation.

The political opposition has understood, from the beginning, it was not going to win the presidential elections against the current “strong man” and, as increasing or reducing its political representation inside presidential elections was not at stake, the only way of gaining political advantage in the future was the boycott to them in order to place once again a ring

of delegitimation that could play in the future against the current president of the IRM; and this is the message understood by the Mauritanian executive that held the elections without the participation of the main political forces. As the Arab proverb says *“The past has fled, what you expect is absent, but the present is yours.”*

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