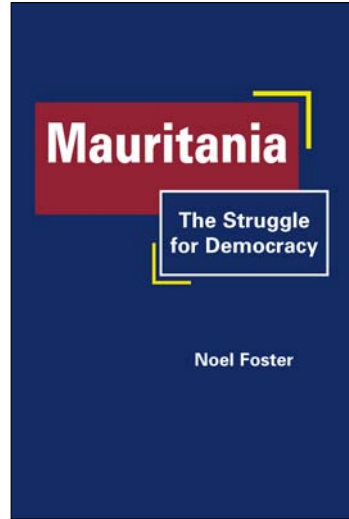


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Mauritania: The Struggle for Democracy

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1

Introduction

On a blistering day in August 2005, a faction of high-ranking officers within Mauritania's security establishment overthrew their master and president of twenty years, Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, and took power in the name of the Military Committee for Justice and Democracy (CMJD). Within days they had engaged the country's major opposition leaders and embarked on an ambitious transition to democracy, promising elections within twenty-four months. This commitment in itself was rather banal; a promised transition to democracy has long been a staple of coups. What would stun observers, however, was that the junta delivered elections within nineteen months, with no junta members running for office, and subsequently relinquished power to elected civilians. The despot's henchmen of two decades appeared to have set Mauritania on the path to become the Arab world's first democracy, an advance seized as proof of democracy's viability in Arab and Islamic nations.

But in August 2008, almost three years to the day later and after only sixteen months of civilian rule, the mirage of democracy vanished when the military toppled the administration of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and installed a junta consisting largely of the very same men who had relinquished power in 2005. The junta leader, General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, later confessed to journalists that he had engineered the overthrown president's election campaign from the start, as Mauritians had long suspected. Had Mauritania's celebrated 2005-2007 democratic transition, capped by presidential elections hailed by the international community as free and fair, been but an elaborate masquerade?

These events raise questions with regard to the potential transition to democracy, particularly in autocratic Arab and Islamic nations. Why would senior officers in an autocracy break ranks and risk their lives to overthrow their patron? What would drive them, once they had taken such risks, to surrender their power to an untested elected civilian (who

would later turn on them)? Why would they topple a president whose election they had orchestrated? Are coups purporting to overthrow dictators so as to enshrine democracy a viable path to democratic development? The trials and travails behind Mauritania's aborted democratic transitions offer a unique opportunity to examine an attempt at democratization and also transitions from pseudo-democracies – authoritarian regimes using the trappings of democracy for legitimacy – to democratic governance.

Mauritania represents both a source of hope and a harbinger of disconcerting trends. Its most recent putsch was but the first of a wave of coups and coup attempts that shook the African continent in 2008 and 2009 in what came to be known as a democratic recession. Unfortunately for Mauritians, their country provides a textbook case of neopatrimonialism, the rule of autocratic elites that seize control of the state and its resources and maintain power through patronage. Exploring how neopatrimonial elites adapt to changing norms and the balance of power within an evolving international system, especially with regard to rising powers, tells us much about a global system where the unipolar order is questioned but democracy remains the dominant paradigm. At the same time, the obstacles Mauritania faces, ranging from the vestiges of slavery and ethnic tensions to underdevelopment, and from the legacy of fifty years of autocracy to the threat of terrorism, would render the country's eventual reform proof of democracy's feasibility elsewhere in the Arab world.

The question of democracy's viability in Mauritania is no longer academic, however. The discovery of oil and prospects of further mineral resources have elevated interest in the country, particularly given its geostrategic location as a bridge between the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa and the Sahara's gateway to the Atlantic. Further, porous borders and the weakness of the nation's government have drawn terrorists as well as organized crime. Abetted in no small part by a failing state under military control, a series of brutal attacks on government forces and Westerners by Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb has placed the country on terrorism's frontlines and strengthened the hand of military autocrats.

In a perfect storm, terrorism, organized crime, and state failure mask an impending societal crisis stemming from centuries of injustices. Two out of five Mauritians are the descendants of slaves,¹ facing discrimination in a society where the vestiges of slavery impede reconciliation and where many contend slavery still persists. Mauritania's black African population suffered grievously from government-sponsored ethnic violence twenty years ago and an

unfinished reconciliation since. And an exclusionary, predatory elite continues to preside over an overwhelmingly destitute population, the vast majority of whom survive on less than two dollars a day. The combined weight of these festering wounds threatens this society's viability. The outcome of the ongoing political crisis will determine whether the looming catastrophe can be averted.

At issue is more than the fate of a nation. The outcome of a silent war between neopatrimonialists and those struggling for democracy will determine whether these iniquities can be rectified. If dissent does not lead to reform, the groundswell of discord could easily be manipulated by radical ideologies and directed at the neopatrimonialists as well as at an ostentatiously prosperous West blamed for supporting them. In the era of the globalization of terror as well as commerce, the fate of democracy in autocratic, underdeveloped states now affects our own.

Courageous Mauritians intent on making theirs the first democratic nation in the Arab world are leading the struggle for reform. The country's ruling elites err dangerously in their illusion that with cosmetic changes the status quo can persist, when major advances have already shaken society from within. After the 2003 coup attempt that exposed the absence of support for the Taya regime among its apparatchiks and the 2005-2007 democratic transition that saw Mauritania's first free and fair presidential and national assembly elections, the August 2008 coup inadvertently brought new democratic gains. Mauritians contested the coup and their military rulers in the streets for the first time in history, while a bold and innovative press openly critical of the military regime expressed its views and easily skirted censorship. Even regime loyalists demanded concessions from the military junta, selling their support dearly in a non-binding political contract. In such a dramatic manner, Mauritania's political opposition drew attention to this formerly obscure country.

Beyond its domestic consequences and geostrategic import, the country's political upheaval is of interest because of the developments that saw the nation catapulted to the fore as an exemplar of democracy for other Arab, African, and Islamic states. In piercing the mirage of the widely acclaimed 2005-2007 democratization process, the illusions that plague democratization elsewhere become apparent. And in consequence, the country yields unique, counterintuitive lessons that challenge conventional wisdom and deeply held assumptions in democratization theory. Regime change against autocrats, military or civilian, elected or self-designated, can come from a despotic system's henchmen. These praetorian guards can topple the very regimes that empower and enrich them with the most conservative and self-interested

of motivations. A nation's political opposition and civil society can undermine its democracy and lend credibility to autocracy, while a tattered dissident coalition, including many corrupt and compromised politicians fighting for their personal interests, can serve as democracy's most ardent defenders.

In times of adversity a nation's weakness can be its strength, as an impoverished Mauritania dependent upon foreign aid followed the edicts of donors demanding democratic reform. Development aid, however, can strengthen autocracy by enriching its elites. Procedurally impeccable elections can conceal the subversion of democracy by these autocratic elites, rather than its consecration. Disturbingly, policy towards countries such as Mauritania is frequently built on a bedrock of mutually consented illusions. The nation's case presents a call for reflection on how outsiders, particularly Westerners, construct their understanding of political realities on the ground, both in Mauritania and other underdeveloped autocracies, and hence how they formulate policy towards these countries.

Democracy's causal factors are not idle academic questions in the midst of what some democratization scholars argue is a global democratic recession, one followed and likely aggravated by an economic crisis unparalleled in recent decades. As the coming chapters will illustrate, this recession is questionable, as it can be argued that to label the global counter-reformation against democratic reform a democratic recession is to lament the loss of illusory gains. By far the most pernicious influence in the worldwide push for democratization is the reductionist and proceduralist vision of what constitutes democracy. In many countries, the mere periodic designation of the incumbent by ballot ensures these regimes' classification as partially free.

The existence of a anti-democratic counter-reformation on several continents is indisputable. Eight years of the Bush administration's efforts at democracy promotion lent support for democratization unfortunate connotations. Global democratic development has stalled. The unction of popular support afforded "color revolutions" cannot conceal that the democratic regimes toppling autocracies are equally capable of incompetence and malfeasance. Ukraine's political crisis following the Orange revolution and Madagascar's emergent trend since 2002 of civilian coups legitimated by popular support demonstrate how leaders of grassroots reform movements can just as readily abuse or squander their power. Moreover, the world's most autocratic holdouts are precisely those whose power rests in the will to employ violence on whatever scale self-preservation dictates, and are hence impervious to "color revolutions."

The present circumstances, whether an anti-democratic counter-reformation or a democratic recession, bring to mind the catastrophic democratic recessions in the second quarter of the twentieth century and lend urgency and relevance to the understanding of the factors behind democracy. Mauritania's democratization is of interest because it defies conventional theoretical explanations, lacking economic development, high levels of education or a burgeoning middle class. In the forthcoming review of democratization theory, it should be apparent that the materialist approach centered on economic growth, with some concession to vaguely termed "democratic values," is insufficient as democratic development's sole causal factors. The prevailing materialist focus on socioeconomic factors does not suffice to create a satisfying explanatory model for democratic development. Relevant concepts must also combine this focus with idealist approaches that elucidate the worldviews motivating practices and shaping realities. Lastly, in addition to descriptive accuracy, explanatory models should also yield prescriptive uses of help to those on the ground.

A work so reliant on cultural and historical factors best begins with an examination of their interaction. Since cultural considerations are of such importance in explaining a country's politics, they are included in the preliminary chapters. One cannot fathom the reasoning behind conduct in the public as well as the private sphere without recognition of how ingrained individualism, a sense of impermanence, recognition of contingency and an aversion to attachment are within Moor life, stemming from the environment that produced Moor culture. As Chapter 2 details, Mauritania's rich ethnic makeup shapes its politics, just as its history is inseparable from its present in a society where oral history is perpetuated as part of the socialization of the young.

Though the term Moor might appear quaint, more fitting in *Othello* than in the present time, it is the term used by Mauritians with Arab and Berber heritage to describe themselves and their culture, as well as the identifier used by all other Mauritians. Similarly, as many Mauritians consciously identify with "tribes" and employ the term to describe patrilineal lineage groups, that term will also be used. Fixed surnames have gained ground in Mauritania. However, the terms "Ould" and "Mint," signifying respectively "son of" and "daughter of", remain in Moor custom and shall be used, with the rare exception of those names so frequently mentioned that the full patronymic is not commonly used in Mauritanian parlance, such as "Taya" for Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya and "Abdel Aziz" for Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz.

Central to the country's narrative and its present condition is the rise of a neopatrimonial elite allied with the military in the wake of military

coups, also chronicled in Chapter 2. Fifty years after independence, the country remains trapped within the clutches of a ruling class that has commandeered state resources and seeks to preserve this fundamentally untenable socio-economic structure through patronage. This elite mixes venerable tribal loyalties with manipulation of the modern tools of the state and state capitalism, so as to indulge in conspicuous consumption and accumulation unthinkable in traditional society. Their neo-patrimonialist ideology has permeated the country and shaped a generation of its youth.

This system of appropriating the proceeds of the nation's natural resources as well as development aid, all under the control of a patronage system Mauritanian anthropologist Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh dubbed the "Sultanic system,"² proved unsustainable. Chapter 2 elucidates how the senior leadership within the military and security establishment realized by late summer 2005 that they had to overthrow the very regime that dispensed them their privileges so as to retain them.

Having overthrown their master, however, the colonels came under considerable pressure to liberalize and turn over power to an elected civilian government. Chapter 3 portrays their decision-making. Dependent on the West, the military high command had seemingly little choice but to extend unprecedented freedoms and initiate reforms shown in Chapter 4, before holding municipal, legislative and finally presidential elections. Though the EU and the US differed in their democracy promotion efforts elsewhere, in Mauritania Washington chose to follow Brussels rather than pursuing its own course.

Procedurally flawless elections did not signify military neutrality. Vying factions within the military had no intent to surrender power so riskily seized from a tyrant to the very opponents of the regime they had once protected. The military's involvement changed the course of history. And as Chapter 5 reveals, the international community helped organize and then endorsed a mirage.

Elections and a democratic transition offered little tangible change, however, in the lives of the bulk of Mauritians living in absolute poverty. Nor did it eradicate the profoundly anchored culture of corruption that had flourished since the advent of the neopatrimonialists, as portrayed in Chapter 6.

Prior to his election President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was a little-known exile. Chapter 7 uncovers why this weak man, a septuagenarian soft-spoken Brahmin reviled for his administration's corruption and ineptitude, took on the soldiers who had made him president.

Faced with a rebellious president who dismissed them, the senior ranking officers toppled the hapless Abdallahi in a coup. Initially, they found many backers, described in Chapter 8 – *All the General's Men*, among them the best and the brightest of an elite that had compromised itself with military rulers for the past three decades.

But the generals had not counted upon popular resistance. After all, this was unprecedented in a country where civilians backed the victorious military side as soon as its victory was evident. As the account in Chapter 9 relates, a most unlikely coalition arose to defy the military and take to the streets, influenced ironically by the very climate of freedom the military had cultivated only two years before.

In Chapter 10, a bankrupt military facing international condemnation and domestic pressure finds itself trapped with no recourse but to earn legitimacy among the populace, a notion once foreign to Mauritania. In populist reform measures that redistributed government proceeds to the poor for the first time in memory, junta leader General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz begins his campaign for president in earnest by visiting slums and tent cities while distributing government largesse to the masses. Abroad, the regime maintained relations with Western countries with vested interests, notably Spain. Yet it also cultivated ties with China, Iran, and Libya, while expelling Israeli diplomats. Its measures would fail to placate opposition to the junta, however, either among principled dissidents or opportunists loyal to the old regime. The continuing stalemate brought an aborted attempt at mediation on the part of Muammar Qadhafi, as president of the African Union, and a more serious effort to bring the opposition to agree to elections by President Wade of Senegal, before the government was finally compelled to hold new presidential elections under a transitional unity government. Chapter 10 then covers those elections in July 2009, subsequent attempts at reconciliation in the wake of General Abdel Aziz's election as president and opposition claims of fraud, and analyses the significance of the results.

In the concluding chapter, the work's analysis is reconsidered and tangible prescriptions for those engaged on all sides of Mauritania's struggle to reform are discussed. Its prescriptions challenge received wisdom on development aid, diplomatic relations with military regimes and predatory elites, and the path towards democratization in developing Muslim nations, whose future, linked to ours, depends upon it.

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¹ CIA World Factbook, Mauritania, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html#People>, retrieved January 20, 2008.

² Best outlined in Ould Cheikh, Abdel Wedoud, *Les habits neufs du sultan: sur le pouvoir et ses (res)ources en Mauritanie*, Maghreb-Machrek N°189, Autumn 2006, pp. 29-52.