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Mauritania: a small country gives a big lesson in democracy

NIELS PLANEL

Abstract: America is feeling the full impact of the absurd theories of its neo-conservatives, playing like the sorcerer's apprentice with international relations, who hoped to force the creation of a "Great Middle East" by imposing an imaginary democracy on Iraq. And yet at the same time, a small Islamic country is going through a gentle revolution by which it is proving to those sceptics who doubted it, that democracy can be "grafted" onto a nation whose legislation is largely based on Islamic dogma - but that the operation is always much more successful when it is wanted by the people. The proof is that on 19 April 2007, the inauguration of 69 year old President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi took place, bringing to a conclusion a process which started with a coup d'état in the summer 2005 aimed at moving the Islamic Republic of Mauritania from a dictatorial regime to a stable democracy. Something that was barely imaginable a few years ago.

Résumé: Alors que l'Amérique est en train de prendre toute la mesure de l'absurdité de la théorie des néoconservateurs, apprentis sorciers des relations internationales qui ont voulu initier par la force la création d'un « Grand Moyen-Orient » à partir de la démocratisation fantasmée de l'Irak, un petit pays islamique vient de vivre une révolution en douceur et de démontrer, pour ceux qui en doutaient, que non seulement la « greffe » de la démocratie peut prendre dans les pays dont la législation dérive en grande partie du dogme islamique, mais qu'elle ne s'impose jamais mieux que quand elle est soutenue par le peuple. De fait, le 19 avril 2007, l'investiture du président Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, 69 ans, devait couronner un processus débuté avec un coup d'État à l'été 2005 et visant à faire passer la République Islamique de Mauritanie d'un régime autoritaire à un système démocratique aux fondement solides. Un défi difficilement imaginable il y a encore peu.

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Niels Planel

A lesson for American neo-conservatives

America is feeling the full impact of the absurd theories of its neo-conservatives, playing like the sorcerer's apprentice with international relations, who hoped to force the creation of a "Great Middle East" by imposing an imaginary democracy on Iraq. And yet at the same time, a small Islamic country is going through a gentle revolution by which it is proving to those sceptics who doubted it, that democracy can be "grafted" onto a nation whose legislation is largely based on Islamic dogma - but that the operation is always much more successful when it is wanted by the people. The proof is that on 19 April 2007, the inauguration of 69 year old President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi took place, bringing to a conclusion a process which started with a coup d'état in the summer 2005 aimed at moving the Islamic Republic of Mauritania from a dictatorial regime to a stable democracy. Something that was barely imaginable a few years ago.

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania – a small little known country

Can Mauritania really be called small? The answer is "No", if you consider that its land mass is over a million km², 90% of it being desert, making it twice the size of France. But in terms of population it is small, with just over 3 million inhabitants. Situated between the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa it borders the two regions, a dynamic which is reflected by the racial mix of its population. Its people are a mix of Moors (particularly, the Sanhadja tribe of Berbers) and Black Africans. There is also a third group of people, the Haratins, descendants of slaves. Starting from around 1900, it was colonised much later than other countries in this part of Africa. Everything else about Mauritania is complex. Mauritania is of interest to France, mainly because of its strategic positioning. The Encyclopaedia Universalis explains that it "creates a barrier to invasion by other European nations, as well as being a bridge between French northern Africa and French western Africa". Initially, the country was governed peacefully by Xavier Coppolani, who ruled remotely from Senegal, until the government moved to organise military expeditions around the

year 1910 following the refusal of many tribes to bow to French rule. In his book *Wind, Sand and Stars* (published in 1939), Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, French pilot and philosophical writer, recounted many events that confirm the weakness of France's position. Eventually, however, the French administration managed to impose the "French system", the Second World War followed and independence was granted in 1960. In the intervening years (1946-1958), Mauritania was granted the status of French Overseas Territory (an administrative division of France) as per the French Constitution at the time. Moktar Ould Daddah, who led the fight for independence, became President until 1978. However, the most famous name in modern Mauritanian history is that of Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, an ex-military officer who came to power on 12 December 1984 following a coup d'état which was supposed to rid the country of dictatorial rule. In reality, it wasn't long before the new leader slid into authoritarian rule. During his reign he caused the disappearance of many political groups, over and over he "won" elections in the first round of polls, he imprisoned, suppressed and so on. His rule was more a model of everything that democracy is not. President Ould Taya remained in power for 20 years until 2005.

Yet, it is in this context that the recent Mauritanian presidential elections, which the press called "exemplary", reached their second round on 25 March 2007. A fact which is even more remarkable considering that the country is not used to voting beyond the first round of elections. So, what happened? This election marked the climax of pre-planned policies executed following a coup d'état that took place in August 2005. After 20 years of dictatorial reign, President Maaouya Ould Taya was deposed by the army, lead by Colonel Ely Ould Mohammed Vall, who temporarily took power with the express aim of transforming the Mauritanian political system into a democracy. And all this was to be accomplished in just two years. In order to succeed he made a key promise: he made it clear right from the start that he and his supporters would not stand for the presidential elections. He kept his word. Elections were held in the autumn and winter, and today political parties flourish, there is greater freedom of the press, judicial institutions are more impartial and the economy is stable, although growth-led inflation is not helping the situation for the poorest members of society. Basically, this presidential election was the first of its kind since independence in 1960 – the first one that was free and fair, the very essence of western democracy.

All the same, despite being assisted by members of the ancient regime, the new "independent" president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, promised to install a united national government. In other words, he would have to work with politicians of different persuasions, including those who supported Ahmed Ould Daddah, his biggest opponent who came second in the first round of elections on 11 March. Equally, he would have to avoid opening old wounds in order to allow Mauritania to make a fresh start. For the time being, the Pandora's Box that was

opened has been re-shut; however, no doubt, in the future it will be re-opened by future generations.

Nevertheless the whole process is exceptional, particularly as everything proceeded without a hitch, as was attested to by journalists and international observers who were present to witness the event. The fact that an African country has decided all by itself to overthrow a dictator after 20 years of rule and in order to create a democratic haven is even more amazing. The Libyan leader, Gaddafi, was quick to criticise the country which, according to him, had fallen under the influence of the West. Although Mauritania is an African country, it is also Islamic and Arabic, in fact it is well-known for having Islamic theologians who teach all over the Arab world. The Mauritanian case represents a real slap in the face for extremists on all sides, to Western extremists as well as those in the Arabic world, who believe that Islam is not compatible with democracy.

In reality, a referendum for the people was carried out in June 2006 to determine whether the people wanted to move to a democratic system or not. The majority of Mauritians had voted for constitutional reform. Most of the votes were carried by a candidate who succeeded in convincing voters that he was a moderate. As for the elections themselves, the enthusiasm which they provoked, appear to represent a true popular desire for renewed political activity, but in a democratic system. High voter turnout, which was around 65-70%, seems to have confirmed this.

The situation prior to Maaouya Ould Taya's overthrow

President Taya's power had already been weak for sometime. Even before the coup d'état there had been several failed attempts to overthrow him, serving to further weaken political activity, which led to abuses of power. There had already been a failed coup on the 8 June 2003 producing 36 hours of fighting and 14 fatalities, provoking many civil and military arrests. This was quickly followed by the arrest of an opposition candidate, who also happened to be an ex-president who had himself been deposed during a coup in 1984, just before presidential elections at the end of 2003. Looking back, his actions were symptomatic of a dictator, who had been too long in power, who could feel his final hour approaching, and was desperately trying to avoid the inevitable by any means possible. But his actions were all in vain. The President couldn't call upon the army for help as it was already involved in planning his demise. This was coupled with an economy that had been weakened by high inflation and 2 years of drought, and an invasion of locusts, which only worsened the situation for Mauritians who rely heavily on farming.

The coup d'état on 3 August 2005

Unusually, the President was overthrown without any violence. Those leading the coup took advantage of President Ould Taya's absence in Saudi Arabia for the funeral of King Fahd, and invaded Nouakchott, Mauritania's capital, in the small hours of 2 August 2005. The army took control of certain strategic points (the headquarters of central government administration, national television and radio) and positioned itself to block any possible actions by loyalists. However, the move proved to be unnecessary as there were no signs of resistance. The people were not slow in showing their joy at the downfall of a government that had been unpopular for a long time and it didn't take long for celebrating to start in the capital's streets.

Right from the outset, the new "Military Council for Justice and Democracy" lead by Colonel Ely Ould Mohammed Vall, the then Director of National Security and friend of Ould Taya since his inauguration as President in 1984, made it clear that it planned to hold power for two years only, a time period that it judged adequate to cover the transitional period to democracy. There were mixed reactions from abroad. Officially, the African Union (AU) Commission, presided by Alpha Oumar Konaré immediately condemned the power takeover. Understandably, it was difficult for an organisation of this type to encourage this sort of actions, which in part have helped to stigmatise Africa in the eyes of the rest of the world. The AU was aware that the African continent cannot support continuous crises, therefore Mauritania was suspended from participating in its activities. The only other powers able to reverse the situation as was were France and the USA, who instead acted cautiously making a few official statements, preferring to wait and see what unfolded. Some in the press talked about a possible link between the coup d'état and future oil production. They held that they saw an invitation for officers traditionally close to power to "move to action". However, it is not clear how they arrived at this conclusion and the theory is not developed further.

As a consequence, the Military Council decided to increase the number of visible signs of peaceful transition. The day after the coup, the new leader received ambassadors from countries from the West represented at Nouakchott, as well as from African and Arab countries. Foreign investors were assured that payments would be made. The announcement that Parliament had been dissolved was made quickly, with the precision that none of the Council members would run for presidency in the elections. They were, of course, obliged to keep the promise made in the referendum. The diplomatic links officially recognised in 1999 were not broken between Israel and Mauritania. The only two other nations in the Arab League to have such links are Jordan and Egypt. A transitional prime minister was nominated a few days after the military coup. France changed tack and declared itself to be optimistic for the future outcome. Barely a few weeks after

the coup d'état, the USA and the AU declared their confidence in the ruling team and offered their cooperation, with the proviso that the elections run to full term. It should be noted that Washington viewed Mauritania, and still does, as an important ally in the fight against terrorism. In fact, for a long time now American military experts have been dispatched to Mauritania to train troops how to combat Islamist extremists.

At last it seemed that there was a hope that this would lead to something different: the coup d'état would not end up replacing one dictator with another. The president of Senegal, a neighbouring country, Abdoulaye Wade pragmatically declared the day of the coup: "The military coup is over. It's now time to work towards democracy". It's exactly what the leading team did for the next two years that followed.

Trying the democratic experience

During an interview printed by *Wal Fadjri* (Dakar) a Senegalese newspaper, that took place on 14 March 2007, Ely Ould Vall noted, "It's necessary to understand that what has happened during this period is not only political". In fact, during the nine months that separated the coup d'état and the presidential elections, many reforms were carried out across many areas, political, economical, judicial; all aimed at revitalising Mauritania. Good government started to be valued; transparency became the watchword, made particularly noticeable with the creation of Mauritanian Hydrocarbon Society, whose job it is to monitor the country's petroleum operations. The Central Bank's independence was strengthened. The currency was cleaned up, although petroleum production caused inflation to rise to the detriment of the poorer classes.

However, on the other end of the scale, civil servants saw their salaries doubled. President Ould Vall explained his politics behind the decision: "Giving civil servants miserable salaries leaves the door open to corruption. By doubling their salaries, we hope to eliminate this tendency" (see *Wal Fadjri*). At the same, construction work related to infrastructure was carried out, such as adduction of water to the capital and planning for port structures. Furthermore, from the end of 2005 to the beginning of 2006, a series of elections took place: legislative, municipal, senatorial and presidential, as well as a referendum on the constitution which took place in June 2006. As for foreign relations, the country took care to preserve links with its neighbours and still remains on good terms with international organisations such as the World Bank and the IMF. Today a new era starts. Once the new president is inaugurated any institutions associated with the transition period cease to exist as per the Constitution. All in all, it will have taken only two years of work to lay down the basis for democracy in a country that had not seen free elections since its independence in 1960.

Thoughts on the future

In the book *L'inconnu de L'Elysée* published by Fayard in February 2007, Jacques Chirac talks at length about one of the key moments of his presidency: his refusal in 2003 to support the Bush administration during its Iraq invasion. The former president explained his position: "I explained to [George. W.] Bush over and over again, that he was making a colossal mistake and he should let the inspectors [responsible for finding out whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction or not to] do their job. Their work would undermine Saddam's power which would eventually crumble one way or another. The Americans didn't want to believe me. They were not able to resist the temptation of dissolving the Iraqi armed forces, to which I had raised the objection, 'and how would the government of this country enforce its authority'? The army would have been in agreement, they would have sided with whoever we wanted..." (p.427) Former President Chirac had understood before the intervention that it would lead to the implosion of the country and to civil war within its borders. Earlier on the previously cited book, the former French leader said that "well before the crisis, he had thought that [Saddam Hussein's] regime was doomed and would collapse all by itself 'if we moved carefully'. [...] 'It was necessary to handle the situation cautiously, a bit like you would with a glass vase from Murano. But the Americans wanted to get rid of Saddam Hussein. I've always held that another country does not have the right, whatever the situation, to decide on matters that have such kinds of repercussions. Only the UN does [...]' " (p. 418).

Aside from the proximity in terms of time of the two events, it is very tempting to make parallels between the two interventions, the one in Iraq, decided upon and led by foreign forces, and the one in Mauritania, where the overthrow of the ruling dictator and the transition were led by the country's own military forces. As for the rest, the transition which was supported and desired by the majority of the population was peaceful, like the coup d'état in fact. The consensus of opinion meant that the Arab-African country avoided descending into civil war or fragmenting the country, causing fighting among its peoples. It is not possible to say the same about Iraq, where the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds are destroying themselves in civil war, where at times it seems that the only way out for the country now is to consider the creation of a federal state or a union of independent states. What about the region as a whole? Rather, isn't the Middle East a tinderbox? The Maghreb, on the other hand, has started to show signs of widespread stability, favourable for development.

Further differences arise: since the leaders of the Mauritanian junta took power themselves they can justifiably claim that their government is completely legitimate, which is neither the case for the Sunnis or the Shiites in Iraq. On the whole the Mauritanian army remained faithful to the

new leaders, ensuring the stability of the institutional transition. As for Iraq, it finds itself in a difficult situation because Saddam Hussein's former elite troops disappeared during the Iraq war in 2003, leaving the country in a state of chaos. The regular army was defeated and the USA is trying to re-construct an Iraqi army. In the meantime, violence which is reaching horrifying levels is claiming more and more lives. In Mauritania, not a single drop of blood was spilled during the coup d'état, and peace was maintained, disturbed only by enthusiastic Mauritians excited at finally being able to discuss freely politics.

We can learn an important lesson from the experiences of the two countries which undoubtedly can serve us well in the future. Obviously, the issues at stake are not the same. Of course, it must be remembered that with its roughly 3 million inhabitants and scarce resources (petrol has been mined since last year) Mauritania's assets were not greedily desired by other nations. Whereas, Iraq interested everybody owing to its estimated volume of petrol reserves, as well as its history, important geographical position, military potential and its leader's politics. Above all it was America's neo-conservatives and their obsessive ideas about this country, namely, the downfall of its leader and the setting up of democracy in the Middle East starting with legendary ancient Mesopotamia, which blinded them to the innumerable consequences of military intervention. Perhaps the example of what happened in Mauritania came too late to be of use in this sense?

However, what follows now should be closely observed. The challenges that currently lay ahead for Mauritania and its new government are no less weighty: it must first ensure the long-term democratisation of the country, and secondly, allocate petroleum profits in the best way possible in order to support economic and social programmes, stabilise politic structures, develop infrastructures, fight the play of illiteracy, fight against climatic dangers and so on. Mauritania is vulnerable to these dangers, as was illustrated by the invasion of locusts in 2004 which also lost the country 40% of its grain production. Furthermore, the country is on one of the routes used by Sub-Saharan African clandestine immigrants to get to Europe, human traffic which costs many lives and an issue that Mauritania, along with many other countries, will have to manage in conjunction with the European Union.

It is rich in natural resources such as fish, iron (it is the world's second largest exporter), and since 2004, its petrol, making Mauritania well-equipped to ensure its economic take-off. In fact, last year the country was among the top 3 African countries in terms of economic performance. Angola (17.6%), Mauritania (14.1%) and Mozambique (7.9%) reported the strongest growth for 2006. Furthermore, the IMF has cancelled its debt, a positive sign, which will encourage further efforts. It is a good thing that the President is an economist by profession: the army ensures the stability of the current government whilst it implements reforms of the country to the mutual

benefit of all. At regional level, a strong synergy could be developed between a democratic Mauritania, Morocco, well on the road to reform and a stable Senegal, if they cooperate on a few joint actions, which could serve as an example for the rest of the African continent – and perhaps even to the American government next time it decides to engage on the world scene.

Mr Abdallahi promised to form a nationally united government and he was right to do so as Mauritania will need all its resources to pull off this encouraging challenge that it has launched. History is in the making, even for the most modest of countries.