

## Countering Terrorism in an Unstable Democracy: Mauritania's Political Crisis

By Dafna Hochman

ON AUGUST 6, 2008, a military coup in Mauritania ousted the 15-month old administration of President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. Soldiers seized Abdallahi (known popularly as Sidi) and Prime Minister Yahya Ould Ahmed Waghf, took control of the state television and radio stations, and announced that Mauritania would be ruled by an 11-man military junta. Since winning its independence from France in 1960, there have been more than 12 coup attempts in Mauritania, a country of three million that straddles Arab and black West Africa and the Sahara and Sahel regions. Sidi's decision to fire the army chief of staff, the general who headed the presidential guard, and two other top military officials immediately precipitated the coup. Yet the coup is also the culmination of a three-month political crisis marked by bitter disagreements between Sidi and the opposition groups in parliament.<sup>1</sup>

This article argues that in addition to the series of specific concerns with Sidi's administration, the main source of instability in Mauritania is structural. Building an inclusive democracy while countering terrorism—against the backdrop of a strong military presence—eventually brought down Sidi's government. This challenge could confront any civilian president in a democratizing weak state with a strong military. Sidi and his prime ministers were so determined to foster a pluralistic democratic environment that they even brought a newly-formed moderate Islamist party into the government. Simultaneously, the Sidi government's inept approach to counter-terrorism unnerved the cadre of military officers upon whom Sidi depended for credibility. In attempting to appeal to everyone, Sidi satisfied no one.

<sup>1</sup> Contentious issues included the president's ties to allies of the reviled former dictator Maaouya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya and the president and his wife's alleged corruption and misuse of public funds.

### 2007: Mauritania's Fateful Year

In the beginning of 2007, Mauriticians were celebrating their country's successful democratic transition, but by the year's end they were shaken by a series of deadly attacks. Two years after a bloodless coup overthrew President Maaouya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya, who had ruled for 21 years, a lively presidential campaign led to the first democratically-elected civilian president since independence. In accordance with a new constitution that had been approved by a popular referendum in 2006, new governors and legislators were elected from most of the 21 Mauritanian political parties. All of these peaceful and fair elections had been promised by the transitional military government, a group of generals who had overthrown Taya and were nicknamed by some "the good soldiers." Many observers accustomed to Mauritania's history of power struggles were shocked that the transitional government stayed true to its 2005 promise: within two years, it peacefully restored the government to civilian rule. Members of the transitional military regime did not participate in the 2007 presidential elections.

At Sidi's April 2007 inauguration, the soldiers quietly took their leave—at least overtly. Sidi appointed many of the transitional government military officials to key posts within his new administration; General Abdelaziz headed the presidential guard, and another transitional official, General Ghazouani, became the army chief of staff. Although there were hints of military involvement in the new administration, civil, political and press freedoms reached an unprecedented zenith. By 2007, Reporters Without Borders ranked Mauritania 50th (out of 169 countries) on its global press freedom index, up from 139th in the year before the coup. A model Arab-African democracy was in the making.

On Christmas Eve 2007, only months after the new president and legislators assumed office, four French tourists were brutally killed in Aleg, a mountain town southeast of the capital Nouakchott. Shortly after, on December 26, an attack at the El-Ghallawiya military base in northern Mauritania left three soldiers dead.<sup>2</sup> Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic

<sup>2</sup> "Mauritania Arrests Three for Helping Alleged Killers

Maghreb (AQIM) subsequently issued a statement threatening the Dakar Rally, the annual off-road car race that crosses the Mauritanian desert. On January 5, 2008, the organizers of the rally decided to cancel the race for the first time in 30 years, following the recommendations of the French government. On February 1, Nouakchott's biggest nightclub, the "VIP," and the adjacent Israeli Embassy were targeted by six gunmen. Once again, AQIM claimed responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

The timing suggested a link between the democratic experiment and the sudden spate of AQIM attacks. Yet, these attacks had more to do with changing AQIM strategy rather than with Sidi's government. Many believed that following the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat's (GSPC) merger with al-Qa`ida in September 2006, the new organization—AQIM—would continue focusing its attacks within Algeria. Moreover, there were rumors of instability within AQIM ranks, as well as internal disputes about the merger and disagreement over the use of suicide bombs. Yet AQIM's attacks in 2007-2008 suggested the organization's continued potency and its deliberate choice to project force outside of Algeria, distancing itself from its former nationalist character. In 2007, AQIM also perpetrated a series of attacks within Tunisia, calling into question any purported link between democracy and the group's target selection; Tunisia under President Ben Ali, for example, has become a deeply authoritarian state. Moreover, AQIM's selection of targets since the merger (such as Western tourists and the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott) indicated the organization's overall ideological shift away from nationalist symbols of Algerian resistance and toward targets with greater pan-Arab and pan-Islamic resonance.

of Four French Tourists," Associated Press, December 30, 2007; "Mauritania Probes 'al-Qaeda Link,'" BBC, December 25, 2007. The latter attack was reminiscent of the Lemgheity military barracks attacks of 2005, for which AQIM's predecessor organization, the GSPC, claimed credit.

<sup>3</sup> "Al Qaida North Africa Branch Takes Credit for Israel Embassy Attack in Mauritania," *International Herald Tribune*, February 3, 2008.

### The True Link Between Mauritanian Democracy and Terrorism

Despite the uncanny timing, it is therefore unlikely that Mauritania's brief democratic experiment caused the recent flurry in terrorist activity. Rather than democratization contributing to terrorism, the causal link goes the other way: confronting the heightened terrorist threat while allowing for moderate Islamist political participation ultimately undermined Sidi's governments and created enough instability to enable the coup.

Some have accused the newly legalized moderate Islamist parties in Mauritania of providing a fertile ideological ground for the attacks. In 2005, the new transitional military government that assumed power after the coup encouraged the growth of political and civil society and distanced itself from the repressive treatment of Islamists that had characterized the Taya regime. Two main Islamist political groups quickly emerged. The National Congress for Reform and Development (RNRD-Tawassoul), led by the charismatic Jemil Mansour, participated in the 2007 elections, winning five seats in the 95-seat parliament and two seats in the senate. The most recent prime minister, Sidi-ally Waghf, brought ministers from the RNRD and another Islamist group, El Vadhila, into his first cabinet in May 2008.<sup>4</sup> The last few years have also witnessed a resurgence of Islamic traditionalism in Mauritania; Sidi reestablished the Muslim weekend (Friday and Saturday), constructed a mosque at the presidential palace, and sanctioned raids on Nouakchott bars suspected of selling alcohol.

Yet, both the popularity of moderate Islamist parties and the increasingly religious nature of the state do not directly translate into popular support for AQIM. The RNRD is interested in working within the political system. It condemned the terrorist attacks of 2007 and 2008.<sup>5</sup> Most Mauritians, even if they embrace a religious revival, adhere to a tolerant form of Islam and oppose the loss of life associated with AQIM attacks. Mauritians, for

instance, denounced the attack on the Israeli Embassy even though they are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. This target was carefully chosen to underscore Sidi's decision to maintain controversial diplomatic ties with Israel, which were established by the Taya regime in 1999. Mauritians reacted with disappointment to the cancellation of the Dakar Rally, puzzled at how their once peaceful country had transformed overnight into a destination threatening to Western tourists.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the perpetrators of the Christmas Eve attack immediately fled the country to seek refuge in Mali and Senegal—underscoring the absence of a Mauritanian rear guard to protect them.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the pluralistic democratization under Sidi that enabled the growth of moderate Islamist parties did not bolster AQIM. More worrisome is the infiltration by Salafists of Mauritania's moderate Maliki school of Islam, which will likely contribute to AQIM's recruiting goals. According to anthropologist Yahya Ould al-Bara, due to a flood of Saudi funding in the 1990s the number of mosques in Nouakchott mushroomed from around 50 in 1989 to more than 900 by 2002.<sup>8</sup> Since the fall of the Taya regime, which strictly prohibited Islamist political and religious organizing, Mauritania has been inundated with publications, sermons, and organizations funded by Saudi Arabian clerics.<sup>9</sup>

### Military Restraint: Letting the Democrats Counter Terror

While the flourishing Islamist political parties did not contribute to the terrorist activity, these parties' political participation ultimately became a key point of contention that contributed to the political crisis in May 2008. After giving Sidi an early grace period, by 2008 the opposition groups had amassed a litany of concerns regarding his administration. They were critical of

the perceived corruption surrounding the presidential family and his inability to staunch the rising fuel and food prices or economic crises. In addition to these critiques, however, two deeper concerns with Sidi's administration most directly led to the military coup of August 2008.

First, many of the military strongmen who initiated the 2005 coup were wary of Sidi and his government's inept counter-terrorism policies. Sidi was forced to fire his first prime minister, former Central Bank governor Zeine Ould Zeidane, in May 2008 after a series of failed attempts to arrest and convict AQIM members.<sup>10</sup> The military

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officers were particularly horrified by a series of acquittals of terrorist suspects in 2007, including the exoneration—on the grounds of insufficient evidence—of a suspect who had traveled with and tutored Usama bin Ladin. Sidi Ould Sidna, one of the individuals acquitted in 2007, would go on to perpetrate the Christmas Eve attack on the French tourists. After evading capture for months, Sidna was finally arrested in March 2008, only to escape from a Nouakchott prison on April 2. This high-profile escape prompted several security service raids on AQIM hideouts. By late April 2008, Sidna and 20 others had been re-apprehended. Yet, a series of bungled shootouts that month killed a policeman and accidentally injured a French private security guard.<sup>11</sup>

4 “New Mauritanian Cabinet to Include Opposition Members,” Agence France-Presse, May 11, 2008.

5 Daniel Flynn, “Mauritania Killings May be a New al-Qaeda Chapter,” Reuters, February 12, 2008.

6 Armelle Choplin, “La Mauritanie à l'épreuve de l'islamisme et des menaces terroristes,” April 29, 2008.

7 Lydia Polgreen, “Hunt for Suspects in Mauritania Killing,” *New York Times*, December 27, 2007.

8 Flynn, “Mauritania Killings May be a New al-Qaeda Chapter.”

9 “Mauritanie: La montée de l'extrémisme religieux, une menace pour un régime islamique tolérant,” IRIN Service Français, February 5, 2008; Choplin, “La Mauritanie à l'épreuve de l'islamisme et des menaces terroristes.”

10 Vincent Fertey, “Mauritania PM to Form New Cabinet after Resignation,” Reuters, July 3, 2008.

11 “Mauritania Captures Eight al-Qaeda Suspects,” Reuters, April 30, 2008.

Second, even when the Sidi administration improved its counter-terrorism abilities, by July 2008 the military elites were increasingly uncomfortable with the participation of both Islamists and Taya-era officials in the Waghf government. The July 2008 crisis that ultimately led to the dissolution of Waghf's government arose because no one was satisfied. The military elite who had believed that they could still maintain a degree of control over Sidi's policies were dismayed by the diversity of parties included in the Waghf government, while the opposition demanded from Sidi and Waghf that an even greater share of government posts be reserved for Islamist and center-left parties.

Can a multiethnic democracy embrace moderate Islamists and rule through diverse coalitions while fighting terrorism and placating the army? This challenge is not unique to Mauritania, and it has ultimately been the demise of weak civilian governments in democratizing and heterogeneous societies from Pakistan to Algeria. There is a structural problem inherent to weak democracies with strong militaries. The stakes of the normal process of trade-offs, deliberations and bargaining common to parliamentary systems rise when conducted in the shadow of a possible military intervention.

The coup in Mauritania is a symbolic defeat. To those in the West who have encouraged struggling developing countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia to fight terrorism with impunity while building civilian democratic institutions, it is a reminder of the often inherent conflict between these two endeavors. The combustible combination of free elections, Islamist political success, and military intervention is a well-known theme in the politics of the Maghreb region. Images of the bloody Algerian civil war are still seared into the historical memory of the people. Neighboring regimes, whether civilian or military, will use the recent Mauritanian coup to underscore the instability and ineffectiveness of free-wheeling parliamentary democracies, particularly given the growth of AQIM in the region. Mauritians, who took great pride in their position at the vanguard—having elected the first non-incumbent, freely-elected head of state

in the Arab world—now find themselves in a familiar political predicament with an uncertain future.

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