

Failed coup attempt in Mauritania

Brian Smith
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Mauritania's president Maaouya Sid'Ahmed Ould Taya has survived an attempted coup, though his pro-Western government remains vulnerable.

The coup attempt followed the government's crackdown against Islamist and other opposition movements, which has intensified since the US-led war on Iraq began.

Mauritania is an exceptionally poor country of 2.7 million people with an average income of about \$1 per day. It straddles black and Moorish Africa, with the corresponding ethnic divisions. Outside of the capital Nouakchott there are only small urban centres—half of the population are rural and many of them are nomadic. Severe food shortages are expected to be ongoing following six years of drought and famine. Mauritania's main exports are iron ore and fish, though the discovery of oil offshore two years ago has brought interest from the West.

The coup appears to have been led by Saleh Ould Hnana, a tank colonel with alleged Baathist views who was dismissed from the army last year for his suspected involvement in a previous coup attempt. He was backed by disgruntled forces within the air force and armoured units from the military garrison in Atar, about 440 kilometres (273 miles) northeast of Nouakchott.

The coup attempt began in the early hours of the morning of Sunday, June 8, when heavy explosions, military movements, and machine-gun fire were heard around the president's palace in Nouakchott. The fighting continued for two days with the rebels appearing to have the upper hand. The palace, the radio station and key government buildings were taken and changed hands several times in heavy fighting involving tanks, as rebels and government troops fought wearing the same uniform.

There was a media blackout for over 24 hours, and the airport remained closed. Fighting was heaviest around a garrison in the Arafat neighbourhood three

kilometres (two miles) south of the city centre, which became the rebel headquarters.

The president's whereabouts were unknown for several days as he went into hiding. The French denied that he was in their embassy whilst the US embassy remained unavailable for comment. Officers supportive of the rebels included Army Chief of Staff Mohammed Lamine Ould N'Deyane, who was killed in the fighting.

Huge reinforcements were brought in to quell the uprising. The main hospital reports scores dead and wounded plus numerous civilians injured, though exact figures are unknown. Having put down the coup, the government mobilised thousands of its supporters onto the streets—denouncing the coup attempt and rallying support for President Taya in the run-up to elections.

Last November, the United States administration floated a story via the Voice of America (VOA) expressing concern that West Africa was becoming a new base of operations for Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda. It cited Mauritania and Mali as ideal for gun-running operations, with their large desert territories and small populations. Few of the mainstream media picked up the story. The web site *Stratfor*, which is close to US intelligence circles, commented:

“The most obvious reason is that Mali and Mauritania simply are not on the Western media's radar screens. If the VOA story is any indication, Washington might be seeking to change that.”

Stratfor does not consider the present coup attempt likely to have connections with outside organisations, however: “Hnana has demonstrated his ability to gather a force that is willing to take Taya down. From outward appearances, this was an inside job.”

In recent years, President Taya has steered his government along a pro-Western path. When he first came to power in 1984, he developed close links with Saddam Hussein and backed Iraq in the first Gulf War.

He began to distance himself from Iraq after the war and had a bitter falling out with Saddam. In order to appear more moderate to the West he traded the alliance with Iraq for an alliance with Israel in 1999, which has since provided assistance with security, and for closer links with the US. Mauritania is one of only three Arab states to maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, which are widely opposed by Mauritania's large Muslim population.

Since the September 11, 2001, attacks in the US, Mauritania has repeated its determination to "combat international terrorism." Last November, the government closed the offices of the opposition Union of Democratic Forces and banned the party for allegedly fomenting violence. This provoked massive protest throughout the country, with 15,000 demonstrating in the capital.

President Taya has been under increasing pressure since the US-led war against Iraq began and has stirred popular anger with a crackdown against political and religious opposition including the Islamist groups Al-Salafeyah and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as against politicians with former links to Saddam Hussein. Mauritania's banned National Avant-Garde Party (PAGN) party was alleged to have ties to Iraq's Baathist party, and 10 men were charged for trying to reorganise it.

The government initially tried to stop any show of support for Iraq, but last April thousands took to the streets to protest against the war. The official media has launched a campaign against Islamic extremism, with commentators stating that the Al-Qaeda network is "alive and well and living in Mauritania." Following the suicide bombings in northern neighbour Morocco, the Mauritanian prime minister Cheikh El-Avia Ould Mohamed Khouna claimed that extremists hoped to use Mauritania as a new base after being driven from other countries.

Thirty-two Islamic leaders were arrested last month, for allegedly using mosques to recruit young men as fighters. Their trial opened last week with offences ranging from "plotting against the constitutional order" to membership in illegal organisations. In addition, 60 people were detained or arrested—including judges, teachers and university professors—and accused of plotting against the state. The Arabic language weekly *Erraya* was closed last week for "subversion and

intolerance," and a warrant was issued for the paper's CEO. The crackdown is partly an attempt to muzzle all opposition before elections set for the end of the year. Opposition parties organised a large demonstration last month against the detention of teachers and employees working at a Saudi Islamic institute in Nouakchott.

President Taya came to power as a colonel in a military coup in 1984. Since 1991, he technically runs a multiparty state, though his ruling Democratic and Social Republican Party is completely in control. He won the presidential election in 1992 as a civilian and again in the election of 1997, which was boycotted by the five-party Opposition Front coalition. Both elections are widely regarded as suspect. The last election gave Taya's party 54 out of 56 seats in the Senate and 64 out of 81 seats in the National Assembly.

The US embassy was not attacked during the insurgency, though early reports suggested it was. The US has since sent 34 armed troops to bolster security at the embassy and to aid with evacuating its nationals should it become necessary. There are 200-300 US nationals in Mauritania, including about 70 Peace Corps volunteers.

The US administration expressed pleasure at the failure of the coup attempt and the continuation of President Taya's rule. Without apparent irony, a State Department spokesman said that the US "oppose[s] attempts to change governments through extra-constitutional and violent means."



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