

Mauritania coup: condemnations all round, but junta stays in power

Brian Smith
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Last week's coup in the West African state of Mauritania was widely condemned by governments internationally. But unlike other recent coup attempts in the country—in June 2003, August 2004 and September 2004—the military leaders appear to be keeping their grip on power.

The overthrow, which took place August 3 whilst President Maouya Sidi Ahmed Taya was out of the country attending the funeral of Saudi Arabia's King Fahd, was achieved without casualties, and was followed by a quick return to calm.

The coup leaders immediately issued a statement on behalf of a Military Council of Justice and Democracy, claiming, "The armed forces have unanimously decided to put an end to the totalitarian practices of the deposed regime under which our people have suffered."

Taya, who seized power in a coup in 1984, ran a despotic regime in which oppositionists were routinely imprisoned. He had been re-elected three times since 1984, but each time the elections were regarded as fraudulent.

It is reported that there was widespread welcome for the junta amongst the population, with thousands taking to the streets of the capital Nouakchott and the other urban areas, honking car horns, dancing, and chanting slogans such as "Down with Taya!" and "Long Live the putschists!"

On Sunday, August 7, the Military Council ordered the release of 21 Islamist activists who were recently jailed for alleged links with Al Qaeda. Of these, two are Islamic leaders, Mohamed Hassan Ould Dedew and Moktar Ould Mohamed Moussa, who were greeted by cheering crowds. At least 50 others remain in jail.

The council declared that it will hold power for up to two years, supposedly to allow time for the building of "open and transparent" democratic institutions. The junta appointed a civilian premier following the resignation Sunday of the previous premier and his cabinet. Ex-premier Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar, recalled as ambassador to France on Saturday, will head a caretaker government. He is seen as a "consensus candidate" able to head off international and domestic criticism.

Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, leader of the Military Council, met with more than 30 opposition party heads on Saturday, August 6, to reassure them, pledging that neither members of the 17-man Council nor members of the caretaker government will stand in the next elections.

It seems that the junta has widespread support in the armed forces as well as amongst the political elite. Messaoud Ould Boulkheir of the opposition Popular Progressive Alliance commented, "In this crisis situation, a regime change was inevitable. But we would have wished that this be done in a controlled democratic way with all the parties involved."

Following 9/11, Taya became an active participant in the Bush administration's "war on terror"—undertaking a ruthless crackdown on Islamists. This crackdown intensified following the coup attempt in 2003. Hundreds of people were rounded up and scores of Islamist activists and army members were jailed, charged with terrorism or involvement in the 2003 coup plot. Some were accused of collaboration with Algeria's Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, which has alleged connections to Al Qaeda. In May of this year, security forces searched mosques around the capital, seizing Koranic texts and arresting officials.

Opposition and international groups have accused Taya of exaggerating the threat of Islamic extremism to win favour with the United States. The US military has been collaborating with the armed forces of Mauritania and eight other countries, following allegations that groups allied to Al Qaeda are based in the Sahara. US Special Forces recently spent three weeks in Mauritania training infantry and intelligence forces. One hundred and fifty remain in the capital, Nouakchott. The BBC also reports that Mauritania has become a US base for intelligence gathering for sub-Saharan Africa.

A report published last May by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group warned that if Mauritania became closely linked with US anti-terror policy and exaggerated the domestic threat of Islamic terrorism, it would stir up opposition and could prove to be a "very costly mistake." This warning appears to have been borne out.

Taya initially supported Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War against the US, but later switched allegiance and established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1999—one of only three Arab countries to do so. Mauritania has also allowed Israeli Secret Service agents to operate within the country. In return, Israel has given substantial aid to Mauritania and has built a large hospital in the capital. This is boycotted by many Mauritians on principle, to express popular support for the Palestinian cause.

The United Nations, the European Union, the African Union (AU) and the US all condemned the coup against a Western ally, with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan denouncing “any attempt to change the government of any country unconstitutionally.”

The AU suspended Mauritania, condemning “any seizure or any attempt to seize power by force,” and regional power Nigeria exclaimed, “The days of tolerating military governance in our sub-region or anywhere are long gone.... We insist on democracy.”

The US government initially issued a statement via the State Department’s Tom Casey that Washington joined the African Union “in condemning the violence in Mauritania. And we call for a peaceful return for order under the constitution and the established government of President Taya.”

However, at a State Department press briefing the next day, August 4, Casey put a slightly different slant on events. After admitting that the US ambassador to Mauritania had heeded a call that day to go and meet the coup leaders, Casey was asked how the US would respond if its demands for the return to power of the president continued to be ignored.

Casey answered, “Well, again, I don’t want to speculate. At this point, we’re working with the African Union and with the UN. We certainly are seeking a restoration to a constitutional government in Mauritania and will continue to put our focus there for now.”

A journalist pointed out that on the previous day, Casey had called for a return of the president but was now only calling for the return of a constitutional government. It seems that initial concerns of the US and Western powers may well have subsided, given that the junta is claiming that all treaties and accords binding Mauritania would be respected.

As well as its strategic military importance to the US and Western powers, Mauritania’s recently discovered oil is due to come online in the first quarter of next year, with an estimated output of 75,000 barrels per day. This is being drilled by an Australian consortium at the offshore Chinguetti oilfield. In addition to its offshore reserves, it is thought that Mauritania may have more reserves onshore.

The Australian consortium—Woodside, Hardman and Roc Oil—announced Monday, August 8, that the new military leaders are committed to backing its US\$625 million Chinguetti development and will honour existing agreements. Whether this will include oil exports to Israel in exchange for aid, due to begin early next year, is not known.

There was an initial dip in oil share prices on news of the coup, but investor confidence was restored as the apparently stable nature of the coup became clear.

The removal of Taya seems to have resulted from the concern amongst the Mauritanian elite that his clampdown on Islamists was giving rise to increasing instability and that they might not benefit from the future oil wealth. Colonel Vall was Taya’s security chief for almost 20 years and helped him to power in the 1984 coup. He and the other military top brass certainly have no interest in alleviating the desperate poverty of the majority of the population.

Mauritania is an exceptionally poor country, with an average income of around US\$1 per day. Around half of the 2.7 million inhabitants are rural, and many are nomadic. There are few urban centres and only 800 kilometres of paved roads in the largely desert country, which is twice the size of ex-colonial power France. Its primary exports currently are iron ore and fish.

The entire agricultural zone, which amounts to a narrow strip running east-west, was hit with a plague of locusts last year and again this year. The World Food Programme estimates that around 60 percent of the population will suffer a shortage of food this year.



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