

Military coup in Mauritania follows unrest over spiralling food prices

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A recent bloodless military coup in the West African state of Mauritania follows internal disputes within the ruling elite, which is gripped by corruption scandals. It is also a response by the military to growing discontent amongst the population hit by spiralling food costs.

President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was ousted August 6 by the military top brass, led by presidential guard chief Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. Abdallahi had tried to sack four generals, including Aziz, but an hour later Abdallahi, the prime minister and the interior minister were taken away by soldiers. They are being held at the presidential guard's compound.

The military also took control of state radio and television and announced the formation of an 11-member council. They declared the council would ensure that government institutions continue to run normally until new elections, for which no date was given.

In November last year crowds of largely youthful demonstrators in both the capital, Nouakchott, and the southeast of the country protested against increases in the price of staple goods, burning tyres and hurling rocks at public buildings and the police. Food prices in Mauritania have doubled within the past year, reflecting the global trend. In addition, flooding last summer wiped out crops and cattle and displaced thousands of people.

The growing crisis led Abdallahi to fire his government in May. His subsequent cabinet resigned in July, after parliament had delivered a vote of no confidence. He then threatened to dissolve the National Assembly, whereupon 48 members of parliament from the ruling party resigned. This was just prior to the coup.

Parliament had accused Abdallahi of corruption, misuse of public funds, appeasing Islamic radicals and ties to allies of despised former dictator Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, who was ousted in a 2005 coup after 21 years of rule. This led to an increasingly bitter political fight, with Abdallahi accusing his generals of supporting

the MPs in their opposition to him. This support grew after he released some jailed Islamic militants against military advice.

MP Mohamed Moktar Ould Zamel, who supported the military coup, said that Abdallahi made a fatal political miscalculation in turning his back on the military after winning the election. "He forgot that it was the army that brought him to power," Zamel explained.

Aziz is credited with masterminding both recent coups, and had backed Abdallahi in last year's election. "It's the army that brought an end to dictatorship in 2005. And today it's once again she that brings an end to dictatorship, to nepotism, to chaos and disorder," he told a post-coup rally.

Despite clear input from king-maker Aziz and the military at the last presidential election, Abdallahi was hailed by the West as the nation's first freely elected president, and Mauritania as a model of democracy for Africa. In fact, Mauritania is ruled by a small number of wealthy families. Aziz and Abdallahi's wife, who belong to the same family, were the real power behind the president.

Mauritanian student Boubacar Datt, studying in neighbouring Senegal, had a warning for those who might feel relief in the wake of the coup. He told the IRIN news site, "What they don't see is that Sidi [Abdallahi] was only a mascot and never had power. People talk about Mauritania being a democracy, but Mauritania has always been led by the military. This [coup] comes as no surprise. Democracy does not exist. It is only on paper. In daily life, Sidi could not realise his campaign promises." He added that no matter who is in power, food will not suddenly become more plentiful, nor fuel cheaper, nor life any easier.

The United States, the European Union, the United Nations, the African Union, and the Arab League have all voiced criticism of the coup—Africa's first successful

coup since the last Mauritanian one in 2005—but none really expect Abdallahi to be reinstated.

The US military has been collaborating with the Mauritanian military since 9/11, claiming that groups allied to Al Qaeda are operating in the Sahara. US Special Forces have helped to train Mauritania's infantry and intelligence forces, and have used the country as a base for intelligence gathering in sub-Saharan Africa.

This arrangement gained more significance after several terrorist attacks in the past year, blamed on Islamic extremist groups, including the murder of four French tourists in December 2007 and an assault on the Israeli Embassy. Mauritania is one of the few Arab countries to have diplomatic ties with Israel.

A US State Department spokesman said that more than \$20 million of non-humanitarian aid would be suspended and placed under review. European Union Humanitarian Aid Commissioner Louis Michel also stated that the coup has jeopardised EU cooperation and aid—the EU has pledged 156 million euros (\$242 million) over the next five years.

However, analysts believe that oil and mineral extraction will not be affected, and it is likely that the US and EU will quickly move back to normalise relations, especially if new elections are held.

Mauritania is Africa's newest, though small-scale, oil producer, and recent high commodity prices have attracted big investors to the country. The government had estimated crude production would reach 75,000 barrels per day in 2006 when the reserves were discovered, but technical problems have meant that the country produces just 12,000 barrels per day. Whilst this is a comparatively tiny amount in world terms, it has reaped significant rewards for Mauritania's elite, though little benefit has reached the mass of the population of 3.4 million people, who live on just a few dollars a day.



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