Mauritania: Western rapprochement after coup leader Aziz wins election

Brian Smith
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The July 18 presidential election in Mauritania was won by ex-General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz.

Aziz has run the country since leading a coup in August last year, when he deposed President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi.

The coup drew condemnation from the international community with the United States, European Union and World Bank suspending billions of dollars in pledged aid, and the African Union (AU) imposing sanctions. However, the US and EU were expected to move quickly to normalise relations following credible elections.

The coup was a response to both the growing discontent amongst the population over spiralling food costs and infighting within the ruling elite. Parliament had accused Abdallahi of corruption, misuse of public funds, and releasing jailed Islamic militants against military advice. Commentators believe that Abdallahi made a fatal political miscalculation in turning his back on the military after winning the election.

Mauritania is ruled by a small number of wealthy families, with Aziz and Abdallahi's wife belonging to the same powerful family. Aziz is credited with masterminding a previous coup and had backed Abdallahi in the 2007 election along with much of the military elite. Despite this clear input from kingmaker Aziz and the military, Abdallahi was hailed by the West as the nation's first freely elected president, and Mauritania as a model of democracy for Africa.

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

With the West refusing to deal with the junta leaders after the coup, Aziz sought help from Israel in the hope that they could convince Washington to soften its line. Mauritania was the only Arab country besides Egypt and Jordan to maintain full diplomatic relations with Israel. These ties were established in 1999 by President Ould Taya in an attempt to get US and Israeli backing after his relations with ex-colonial power France and the Arab world deteriorated.

When Israel too refused to deal with Aziz, he severed ties in an attempt to win domestic support and shore up his power. He shut down the Israeli Embassy and sought the backing of Libya and Iran. Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi and Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki both visited this year.

Aziz subsequently turned the popular break with Israel into a central aspect of his election campaign, playing to the crowd with rhetorical phrases claiming that he was "honoured" to be considered a "foe of the Jewry," and accusing challengers of plotting with American Jews against Mauritania. "If I win the election, I will give them plane tickets so they'd go to that Zionist state that they love so much," he announced just before the election.

Many within the Mauritanian elite are worried that Aziz may have gone too far in promoting dealings with Iran and Libya at the expense of relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the West. "Voting for Aziz is like voting for Gadhafi. He'll establish a Nouakchott-Tripoli-Tehran axis that's a danger for the security of the country and the region," Ismael Abdel Vetah, a rival adviser, warned prior to the poll.

However, Western diplomats believe Aziz will now seek to rekindle ties with the West. He is keen to promote his commitment to "fighting terrorism," and

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he won support in the EU by helping to prevent illegal immigration to Europe. *Africa Confidential* also notes that Britain recently sent its first resident representative who, though not a full ambassador, is nevertheless “an unprecedented presence.”

The election was intended to restore donor and investor confidence in Mauritania, which is Africa’s newest oil producer with reserves discovered in 2006. The country produces just 12,000 barrels of crude oil per day, a comparatively tiny amount in world terms, but it has attracted investors and has reaped significant rewards for Mauritania’s elite. Little benefit has reached the mass of the population of 3.4 million people, who live on a few dollars a day.

Aziz got an absolute majority, winning 52.6 percent of the vote, which made a second round of voting unnecessary. Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, the outgoing speaker of parliament, came in second with 16.3 percent; veteran opposition leader Ahmed Ould Daddah was third, with 14 percent; and Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, Aziz’s cousin and former junta leader who led the country from 2005-2007, came in fourth with just 3.8 percent. Voter turnout was 61 percent.

Aziz campaigned as a “president of the poor” who would fight corruption against a clique of corrupt plutocrats, and used the state machinery to launch popular measures while in power, such as lowering food and fuel prices, giving land to slum residents and building roads.

Following his victory he vowed to tackle terrorism, as well as its causes, and said that the army would be strengthened. “We need to fight terrorism in terms of security, but also by improving the living conditions of the people and fighting ignorance,” he declared, adding, “I will work for the eradication...of causes of terrorism (such as) poverty, marginality and exclusion.”

After the election the losing contenders, Boulkheir, Daddah, and Vall, claimed that the vote had been fraudulent and appealed to the court to annul the result. Boulkheir told a news conference, “The results which are starting to come out show that it is an electoral charade which is trying to legitimise the coup.”

Despite irregularities, including falsified voting cards and the purchasing of votes, the Constitutional Court and other international observers representing the African Union, the Sahel states and the International Francophone Organisation, found no serious polling problems or proof of fraud and determined that the voting reflected the general will of the Mauritanian people. The US, United Nations and the EU have all noted the decision of the Constitutional Council and welcome the result, since it gives them the opportunity of normalising relations without appearing to endorse a coup.

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