

june 2019

# Mauritania on the eve of the presidential election

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et du Sahel

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# SOMMAIRE

1 – THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, AND NOTHING ELSE! .....	3
2 – A DUAL ECONOMY: INFORMAL AND MODERN .....	4
3 – A TROUBLED REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT .....	5
4 – THE GREAT ABSENT FROM THE DEBATE: VIOLENT EXTREMISM.....	7
5 – THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES .....	8
CONCLUSION .....	13
ANNEXE 1 PRESS AND MEDIA, BETWEEN DIFFICULTIES AND INNOVATIONS .....	14

## Mauritania on the eve of the presidential election

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### I – The presidential election, and nothing else!

Mauritania is about to elect a new president to succeed General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who has ruled the country in a rather atypical way over the past decade.

This election is currently the only subject Mauritians are worrying about. The administrative process (submission of candidatures, administrative census, campaign, election) was revealed on April 17, 2019. The first round of voting will take place on June 22; and a possible second round would take place on July 6.

But the campaign has already started in the country.

If all goes well, the country should experience its first democratic changeover. This unprecedented prospect raises hopes, but also many suspicions and fears.

However, the campaign is disappointing: neither the economic situation (which is nevertheless developing favourably), nor the regional environment (which is threatening), nor the relationship between religious circles and the political sphere (which is developing in a worrying way) give rise to any real substantive debate, and the media do little to stimulate it (see *the annex on the media landscape*).

Five pretenders to the throne have already set the tone: the former general and ephemeral Minister of Defence, Mohamed Ould Cheikh Ahmed Ould Ghazouani, long-time companion and friend of General Ould Abdel Aziz and contender for power; Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeïd, leader of the harratin cause (descendants of slaves); Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar, former Prime Minister and former Ambassador; Mohamed Ould Mouloud, President of the Union of Progressive Forces (UPF) party, which represents a large part of the radical opposition; Kane Hamidou Baba, President of the Movement for Refoundation (MFR), who is running as the candidate of the black African community.

This note provides an update on the country's economic situation, its geopolitical context, the terrorist threat and the government's strategy to combat this scourge. Finally, it presents the main presidential candidates.

## 2 – A dual economy: informal and modern

The Mauritanian economy has long been based on traditional extractive industries (iron, copper and gold), sea fishing and livestock farming.

Mining resources remain essential, and fishing (mainly by Europeans, Japanese and Chinese) is an important source of income and employment, yet it remains opaque and generates far less income than its potential would suggest.

However, the Mauritanian economy is now in an era of diversification, with the exploitation of new resources (oil and gas), and the maturation of new sectors (telecommunications has grown at an average annual rate of 26% since 2011). Major infrastructure projects have been completed (Nouakchott airport) or are under construction (Ndiago ports, Nouadhibou Free Zone). The banking system, despite the presence – admittedly limited – of some well-known international institutions (Attijari bank and Société générale) is said to be saturated given the weight of the national economy (nearly 20 banking institutions).

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) reached US\$5.124 billion in 2017. It amounts to \$1,300 per capita, with a real growth rate of 3.8% (1.5% in 2016) and a national income per capita in purchasing power parity of \$3,710 (*Source, IMF 2015*).

Human Development Index (HDI) was at 0.513 in 2016 (157th out of 182 countries ranked) and one third of Mauritians live below the poverty line. The active population employed in the primary sector is about 40.3%, nearly 9.5% in industry and mining, and 50.2% in services (2016). In value terms, the same year, the contribution of agriculture to the GDP was about 27.4%, that of industry and mining 30%, and that of services 42.6% (services including local commerce, the famous "shops / groceries" on street corners often described as an expression of hidden unemployment).

The incidence of poverty, based on the 2013 General Population and Housing Census (GPHC), is 41.5% (out of 100 households in Mauritania, about 42 are poor), with a poverty incidence of 72.8% in rural areas.

Finally, it should be noted that Mauritania has a colossal debt of more than five billion dollars. The debt-servicing consumes 25% of the State's annual budget. These poor results are the product of patrimonial management and amateurism that characterized the decade 2009/2019.

### 3 – A troubled regional environment

Mauritania's geopolitical environment is complex and remains hectic. Here is the state of play at each of its national borders.

The country shares a common border with **Mali** of more than 2,000 km. Since 2012, the country has been the victim of armed attacks by various Islamist and other terrorist movements operating in all regions of its vast territory. These attacks are a major threat to security throughout the Saharo-Sahelian region. The support of international forces – French and UN, more than 15,000 men – has not put an end to the insecurity yet.

Mauritania, which hosts the largest contingent of Malian refugees – more than 60,000 according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – has every reason to be concerned. So far, the country has not been the victim of reprisals yet. The question is: at what price? And until when? No one knows exactly!

Nevertheless, it should be remembered that Mali maintained good relations with jihadists who had settled on its northern borders since the early 2000's. This "good understanding" did not prevent jihadists and other armed groups from violently attacking the country in 2012 and occupying a large part of its territory. There is still a great risk that this instability will cross Mauritania's southern and south-eastern borders. This indeed is an undeniable sword of Damocles!

All the more threatening given that the status quo, based on a tacit understanding or a balance of terror between the government and the jihadists, could well evolve with the renewal at the head of state which would lead to a change of perspective. As for example, the happened in Burkina Faso after Blaise Compaore was forced from power.

In addition, in the far north of Mauritania is **Algeria**. A country that is currently pitching and uncertain. Mohamed Fall Ould Hamed, Mauritanian sociologist at the Centre for Studies and Research on West-Sahara (Ceros), is concerned about the impact of a possible disaster in Algeria on the situation in the Sahel, especially in Mauritania. He fears a negative effect on the region, comparable to that resulting from the events in Libya, a country with a much smaller population than Algeria. On the other hand, others believe that if things should go in the right direction in Algiers, which means a greater democratization, positive effects on Mauritania and the entire Sahel would be possible. Through the local press, many Mauritians are closely following the events in Algeria. This phase II of the Arab spring, represented by the ongoing events in Algeria and Sudan, fascinates and worries. Whatever direction this new edition of the spring uprisings takes, it will certainly have an impact on Mauritania.

On another level, in the west and northwest there is the **Western Sahara conflict**, which has gone on for the last forty-five years. A territory under Moroccan control and contested by the Polisario Front, supported and even maintained by Algeria. This low-intensity conflict has recurrent eruptions. Recently, the two belligerents almost used weapons. Each time, reason or well-understood interests prevailed.

Although **Morocco** is the only Maghreb country that requires an entry visa for Mauritians, paradoxically, it is the only country in this region with which Mauritania has relatively intense trade relations. Every day, dozens of trucks cross the border between the two countries carrying various Moroccan products to Mauritania and West African countries.

**Senegal**, on the other side of the river, Mauritania's only natural border, appears to be the closest neighbour, both commercially and humanely. There are no visas between the two countries and it is very easy for the citizens of both countries to cross from one bank to the other. Mauritanian livestock and Moorish traders are thousands in Senegal, whose nationals – fishermen and construction workers, craftsmen or domestic workers – are settled in the country's two major cities: Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. These intense relationships are being strengthened by the joint exploitation of gas in the Turtle/Hmeyan field on the Mauritanian-Senegalese maritime border. But, as varied and dense as the relationships are, they are hyper sensitive and complex. Since the tragic events known as the "1989" events, which led to the breakdown of diplomatic relations, every incident, however small, awakens demons and memories of this unfortunate past.

According to the editor of the Mauritanian newspaper *Authentique*, since the signing by the Senegalese and Mauritanian presidents of the joint gas exploitation agreement, bilateral relations between the two countries seem to have been strengthened. Both governments have become more attentive to relationship management.

Finally, beyond its immediate neighbours, Mauritania seems very interested in the distant, rich and very noisy Gulf countries: **the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia**. According to the *Maghreb Intelligence* newspaper (April 1, 2019 issue), the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs has contacted his country's embassy in Nouakchott to request an opinion on the project to establish a Saudi military base in Mauritania!

It should be recalled that Riyadh and Nouakchott had concluded a military cooperation agreement in January 2017, covering military training, the sharing of security information, logistical support, the exchange of experiences and military medical services.

On that occasion, the Saudi Deputy Minister of Defence stated, "*this agreement is the starting point for greater and deeper military cooperation between the two countries*". Is the Gulf conflict being exported to Mauritania?

This interest of the two Gulf countries in Mauritania seems to irritate Morocco. In its edition of April 6, 2019, the Moroccan newspaper *Yabiladi*, which is said to be close to the Palace, wrote: "*To the great displeasure of Morocco, the docking of Mauritania to the Emirates and Saudi Arabia is about to be completed*". He continued, quoting a senior Moroccan official: "*Abu Dhabi and Riyadh plan to consolidate their political and military influence in the southern neighbour by launching major investment projects. The construction of the port of Nouadhibou would be in sight...*". *Akhbarouna*, an Arabic-speaking newspaper, also close to the Palace, wrote the same day: "*a Moroccan intelligence report reveals suspicious Emirates and Saudi actions that anger the King of Morocco*".

The activity or activism of the Saudis and Emiratis in Mauritania extends to a growing number of areas. Thus, the High Authority of the Press and Audiovisual (HAPA) has just authorized, on behalf of a little-known journalist, the creation of a private television channel called: the Arab-African Information Network. The person concerned allegedly paid cash the price of the operating licence, some thirty million ouguiyas (nearly 75,000 euros). These funds would come from the Emirati government, which is working to counter the very strong influence of Al-Jazeera, the Qatari channel, in Mauritania. Or maybe the objective is rather to influence the presidential campaign.

It remains to be seen whether neighbouring and foreign countries interested in Mauritania's stability will also participate in the upcoming presidential election.

#### 4 – The great absent from the debate: violent extremism

Violent terrorism, which has been traumatizing the Sahelo-Saharan region since 2005, has so far been absent from the subjects of the presidential pre-campaign.

This absence is not surprising, as this theme has never been very present in the national political debate. This is explained first of all by the hypersensitivity, more political than cultural, of everything related to Islam in Mauritania. Politicians keep a low profile. Then there is the fact that the country has not experienced any acts related to religious violence since 2011. Finally, in public opinion and in the political world, many people believe that violent extremism only concerns... Westerners.

However, public opinion is becoming increasingly radical. Religious extremism is increasingly influencing government behaviour, actions and decisions. The case of the

young blogger Ould Mkhaytir illustrates this situation well: sentenced to two years in prison, a period already largely exhausted, he has still not regained his freedom. In an interview with the newspaper *Le Monde* (November 2018), President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz acknowledged the powerlessness of his government in this case.

This is not the only manifestation of its complacency, tactical or strategic, towards religious people. This has resulted, in particular, in the introduction of religious instruction at the national baccalaureate, the creation of a radio station dedicated to the Koran, a public television channel that broadcasts exclusively religious programmes, the construction of mosques in all public buildings, the remuneration of Imams from the State budget... The budget of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs this year reaches nearly 4 billion former ouguiyas (just over 100 million euros).

The number of mosques is estimated at more than 21,000, more than two thirds of which are in Nouakchott. The number of Koranic schools is about 12,000. Mosques and schools receive large annual subsidies from the State. Yet these institutions develop a violent religious discourse. Some of them often celebrate terrorist attacks in public and develop a discourse of hatred and exclusion.

Faced with this situation, or rather this time bomb, there has been a total resignation of the political class on all sides. Regardless of who wins the next presidential election, there is every reason to believe that there will be no change in the way this issue is handled in the near future.

## 5 – The presidential candidates

**General Mohamed Ould Ghazouani**, who has a rather good image, comes from a well-known traditional family from the eastern region. He calls for regional change in power.

He announced his candidacy with great fanfare on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March at the Sheikha Ould Boïdya stadium in Nouakchott. His speech, very well received in various circles, contrasts completely with that of his mentor, outgoing President Aziz.

It was the start of a real performance of well proven "support initiatives". Each tribe, each clan, each personality... wanted to launch its own "initiative" even without knowing the candidate. For the moment, nothing seems to be able to resist this momentum.

The peak of this phase was the ceremony organized by the Union Nationale du Patronat Mauritanien (UNPM) for the benefit of the candidate. It took place on March



15 in the brand new Congress Centre of the capital: "Al Mourabitoune". The entire economic elite was present to welcome President Aziz's "wise choice". The ceremony was limited to the screening of a long film on the "achievements" of the Aziz decade.

**Zein El Abidine**, head of the UNPM, supported by President Aziz – who is also, according to some business circles, his business partner – won by mutual agreement the contract for the construction of the Palace, which has been executed in eight months and cost nearly a billion dollars.

In the past, businessmen have always financed and supported the presidential candidate. But never in a such ostentatious way. Moreover, during a trip in early April (aboard a Mauritanian army plane) to all-over the country, the Ghazouani candidate was accompanied, at each stage, by delegations of businessmen appointed by the big business. The list has been made public.

**Isselmou Ould Abdel Kader**, several times minister and declared supporter of Ghazouani, published an article in the press criticizing the "false unanimity" surrounding his candidate. Unanimity strongly criticized on social networks, which constitute a free space, on which the candidate for power is really lagging behind. The fact that he is surrounded by the same men who accompanied Aziz (the Minister of Economy and Finance, those of Oil and the Civil Service...) during the last decade, could well handicap his acceptance in public opinion. As everywhere else in the world and particularly in the region, the latter aspires to change. And even if all this does not call into question Ghazouani's chances, as Mohamed Vall Ould Oumere, director of the newspaper *La Tribune*, thinks, he still has a strong need to give guarantees and attention to the part of the opinion that supports him, while it does not support the current head of state, General Aziz. This is the case, for example, of the Adil party, which until last month was active in the opposition, but decided to support Ghazouani. Its president Yahya Ould Waghf, in an interview published in mid-April in the columns of the newspaper *Le Calame*, made it clear that his party supports Ghazouani in the hope that he will pursue a different policy from that of President Aziz. The latter gives the impression that he is the one pulling the strings and that his candidate is only an extra. Can Ghazouani emancipate himself from his political promoter? Is he going to, or could he choose new men as collaborators? The debate, which has not yet been answered, still stands.

**Biram Ould Dah Abeïd**, President of the anti-slavery movement ARO (Abolitionist Initiative Resurgence). This descendant of slaves, an ambitious and eloquent speaker, has already presented himself to the Supreme Magistracy against Aziz in 2014. He came second with 7% of the vote. A score largely due to the boycott of the opposition, but which has strongly invigorated its holder who dreams of repeating the feat. A difficult yet legitimate objective to achieve.

The first obstacle: sponsorship. The law requires the candidate to be sponsored by five mayors and one hundred municipal councillors spread geographically throughout the national territory. By 2014, the government, which sought to minimize the effects of the opposition boycott, had helped Biram overcome this obstacle by providing him with the required sponsorships and, it is said, financial resources for his campaign. Today, times have changed, with the participation of all parties in the presidential election. And if the opposition has hundreds of elected municipal officials, it has only seven mayors from the Islamist Tawassul party, who support the candidate Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar. Biram's only chance to find this guarantee is the sponsor of these mayors. Will he get them? The question remains.

While waiting to see the outcome, Biram focused on the material launch of his bid, which took place in the auditorium of the former youth centre. There were representatives of all components of the Nation, black Africans, harratines and Moors.

Confident, Biram appeared less extremist and more reconciling. He said: *"I call on you all to come together around this project, in a sincere national effort to bring about the change we are seeking. I call on all political parties, professional and youth organisations and civil society to contribute to its success and to participate effectively in its implementation. I will be attentive to everyone, with an open mind to any constructive idea, to any sensible opinion."*

It is worth mentioning that this harratin leader, who seems to have quieted down, is now linked by an alliance – which some say is unnatural – with the pan-Arab party, of Baath obedience, Sawab. It was under the colours of this formation that he was elected as a Member of the National Assembly last August.

**Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar**, He launched his campaign on Saturday, March 30, from the Mellah stadium, a working-class district on the outskirts of Nouakchott. His meeting attracted a lot of people. The press reports a few tens of thousands of people, mostly women and young people, who are completely committed to his cause. A senior civil servant, former Minister of Finance, twice Prime Minister (1992-1995 and 2005-2007), this son of a non-commissioned member is known for his seriousness, competence and rigour. It is supported by some opposition parties, mainly the Islamist Tawassoul party, which holds 14 seats in Parliament and manages several town halls in the country.

Ould Boubacar does not leave anyone indifferent. His opponents accuse him of having served under all regimes. Is it a handicap or an advantage? asked the newspaper *Le Calame*. The fact that he has contributed to the country's management at the highest level can only reassure the national army, which has maintained its control over the country since 1978.

Ould Boubacar irritates and frightens at the highest summit of the state, which sees behind him the silhouette of the businessman in exile, Mohamed Ould Bouamatou, presented as public enemy number one! On the other hand, he seems to inspire confidence among economic operators of the modern sector, who know him well. The former, including friends and family of Ould Abdel Aziz, would be his tacit or secret supporters against Ghazouani, a tribe member whose dynamism they fear.

Since the successful organisation of an important meeting in Nouakchott, he has begun to worry certain sectors of the regime, and it seems quite possible that a second round will oppose him to the government candidate.

In his profession of faith, Ould Boubacar appeared confident and rather incisive towards power. According to him, it is a question of *"making a blessed change capable of making the will of the people succeed and of fulfilling their aspirations for a better life. An appointment with History where a long night of despair, fear and lack of freedom will be ended by the advent of a new day of hope, happiness and prosperity."*

**Mohamed Ould Mouloud.** He is the president of the UPF, which acts as the Mauritanian left, stemming from the Kadihines movement, a former Marxist movement that has turned into a party since 1999 to join the quest for power through the polls and no longer through the armed revolution. This application of "principle" was officially launched on April 6. This candidate, whose party has three deputies in the National Assembly, is supported by a long-standing leader of the Mauritanian opposition: Ahmed Ould Daddah, president of the RFD party, who cannot run himself because of the age limit (75 years).

It should be noted that the candidate, respected for his political courage, and his party are recognized as truly free of racial prejudice.

**Kane Hamidou Baba.** He is the candidate of a coalition called "Living Together" which includes all black African parties and some civil society organizations. In the past, there has always been a candidate from the black African community in the various presidential elections. But he has never benefited from the unanimity publicly announced within it, either among activists or among leaders.

While particularisms are strongly emerging on the national scene, this community based candidacy of one of the black African leaders is quite natural. It could have the advantage of raising the question of coexistence between the country's different ethnic groups, but it could also have negative consequences for the political affirmation of this community if the candidate registers only a low score, as was the case in 2007. He received only 7% of the votes, even though he had received a massive vote from the people of the Valley – the region where the majority of the country's black African populations are concentrated.



## CONCLUSION

It is difficult to know how the situation in Mauritania will evolve in the coming years, both for internal reasons (difficult economic situation in the major cities, appetite generated by the new prospects offered by the discovery of the major hydrocarbon deposit to be exploited jointly with Senegal) and for external reasons (political and security tensions and volatility of the situation in the Sahel-Sahara, uncertainties in the Maghreb and particularly in Algeria – the outcome of the crisis in this country, in particular, will have a significant impact).

A postponement of the presidential election cannot be ruled out. There would be a risk of serious social tensions with consequences that are difficult to predict.

However, the electoral process seems to be well under way and, if the elections are conducted under good conditions, two positive consequences in particular can be expected:

- ➔ These elections will mark an important step in stabilising the Mauritanian political system and consolidating democracy. The current Constitution was adopted in 1991, and Mauritania held its first multi-party election in January 1992 (presidential election). The October 2001 legislative elections were the first to be considered free and transparent by Mauritians. The 2007 presidential election was the first presidential election to be considered fully democratic, but the President's term was shortened by the military coup in August 2008. The 2013 legislative and 2014 presidential elections were boycotted by the main opposition parties. President Aziz has indicated that he is not standing for re-election this year, so all the political forces that are counting should participate in the election. This should lead to the first real democratic changeover since independence;
- ➔ If the new president is General Ould Ghazouani, he should confirm President Aziz's commitment to the fight against terrorism and cooperation within the G5 Sahel. Nouakchott's proximity to the various traffic relays and hostage-takers in the Sahel (acting under religious cover) should diminish or even cease.

## **Annexe 1                    PRESS AND MEDIA,                                          BETWEEN DIFFICULTIES AND INNOVATIONS**

1) The Mauritanian press faces the same problems that the press generally suffers from in countries newly engaged in a democratization process:

- ➔ Precariousness of the legal environment, working conditions and employment (lack of training, substandard office space, disruption of the production chain, etc.);
- ➔ Critical financial situation: lack of initial capital, working capital, difficulty in recovering the proceeds of sales from an artisanal distribution;
- ➔ Difficulty of access to information sources (subscriptions to international agencies are very expensive...);
- ➔ Low level of training and unsuitability of training to the requirements of the profession;
- ➔ Lack of professionalism among many press actors;
- ➔ Lack of awareness of the regional potential of readers, listeners and viewers, as well as the difficulty of building reliable distribution networks and the lack of transport facilities for the written press;
- ➔ Modest and weak professionalism of national commercial channels and radios.

2) The advent of political pluralism in 1991 was accompanied by the birth of a so-called independent private press. With the exception of a few rare titles, however, it has remained in its infancy and of low quality (lack of training, lack of respect for the rules of the profession, precarious working conditions, etc.).

Despite its weaknesses, however, this press has met with some success with an audience accustomed to truncated information and the monotony of public media such as Radio Mauritania, Al Mauritania (National Television of Mauritania) and the Mauritanian Information Agency and its two daily newspapers *Chaab* and *Horizons*.

3) In this difficult environment, foreign channels, especially from the Middle East, are very popular. French media keeps a respectable listening, especially in the cities and the south of the country. But the development of social networks and direct contacts between citizens is, as elsewhere, changing the deal on communication. For the better, but without excluding the worst in an environment little exposed to contradictory debates.

