



# Mauritania Elections Bulletin

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## Political Background

With two months before the October 16 elections, discussion over the pending national dialogue between opposition parties and President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz dominates the Mauritanian political landscape. On August 5, the second anniversary of his inauguration, President Aziz attempted to assuage citizen concerns over rising food prices and political uncertainty during a public debate with journalists and residents from Nouakchott and the interior cities of Atar and Nema. While citizens were most concerned about security and economic issues, the president used the event to criticize the opposition for being unprepared for the dialogue.

## Negotiations for Dialogue

Following the July 28 decree fixing the electoral date, most parties are wondering how the announcement fits into the dialogue negotiations. There are few visible campaign efforts, with most parties focused more on positioning themselves for the upcoming talks.

The opposition coalition Coordination of the Democratic Opposition (COD) attempted to formulate a new dialogue strategy in early August, after their revised platform was dismissed by the president in late July. However, the Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD) broke ranks with the coalition and issued a set of five preconditions for their participation in the talks. In addition, RFD leader Ahmed Ould Daddah also called for the government to remove the military from politics. Following the RFD's release of their five preconditions, the COD has held several internal meetings to try and reconcile the varying factions within the coalition.



COD banner (ANI)

### RFD Preconditions for Dialogue

- 1) Adopt the 2009 Dakar Accords as the basis for the dialogue.
- 2) Open state media to all political actors.
- 3) Lift ban on peaceful public demonstrations.
- 4) Prohibit the award of business contracts to politically affiliated companies.
- 5) Postpone elections until opposition and majority actors agree on the electoral code and calendar.

President Aziz responded that “the conditions that [the RFD] calls for must be the result of the dialogue itself,” rather than prerequisites. The president pointed to the split within the COD as an indication that opposition parties are not prepared for talks.

Some COD leaders have suggested forming a committee with Prime Minister Mohamed Ould Moulaye Laghdaf to discuss criteria for the dialogue. The RFD and the Union of Forces for Progress (UFP) oppose this approach on the grounds that they want direct engagement with President Aziz and that consulting the prime minister could delay the dialogue.

Despite efforts by prominent Mauritanian civic groups, including the Forum of National Human Rights Organizations (FONADH), African Meeting for the Defense of Human Rights (RADDOH) and the Civil Society Platform, to build support among parties for civil society to play a role in the dialogue, neither side in the negotiations has indicated willingness or interest in formal involvement.

## Election Administration

Opposition parties want to be more engaged in election preparations, although they are unclear on specifics. UFP leader Moustapha Ould Bedredine recently claimed that “we do not ask for elections to be postponed, we can keep them on October 16; however, we demand to participate in creating conditions for full transparency.”

The extent of preparations is currently unclear, and there is broad speculation that the interior ministry does not have the technical capacity to organize elections in two months. Although the ministry announced on August 15 that candidate registration for municipal contests would be held from August 17-27, rumors over a potential electoral postponement continue to circulate. Political analysts point to recent statements by President Aziz emphasizing that the dialogue will include discussion of a “consensual electoral timetable” as further indication that the October 16 date will not hold.

## Civil Society

African-Mauritanians continue to organize demonstrations and advocacy campaigns to demand an end to the census. Since its inception, the process has been criticized for discriminating against Mauritania’s non-Arab populations. There were increasing reports of officials targeting African-Mauritanians in northern communities with humiliating questions to verify their ethnic backgrounds, including demanding that African-Mauritanians prove they are not slaves and requiring that speakers of Soninke and other African-Mauritanian dialects recite the Qur’an and speak Arabic to prove their citizenship.

Ibrahima Sarr, former presidential candidate and leader of the predominantly African-Mauritanian Alliance for Justice and Democracy/Movement for Renewal (AJD/MR) party, called on the government to suspend the census. Sarr further criticized the census when his party’s regional coordinator in the northern city of Nouadhibou attempted to enroll, but was rejected by census officials. The officials claimed that the coordinator was ineligible because he had a Senegalese mother and that census workers had been instructed against enrolling Mauritians with foreign parents, although that does not correlate to any provisions in Mauritanian citizenship law. Facing mounting criticism over the census, President Aziz gave a televised address on the census on August 13, during which he dismissed allegations of racism and refused to suspend the process.



*February 25 Movement logo*

Citing a desire to bring the “Arab Spring” to Mauritania, the February 25 Movement – a loosely organized group of young Mauritians – is organizing regular demonstrations and increasingly clashing with police forces. After a series of sit-ins and protests in early August, President Aziz invited representatives of the movement and other youth associations to meet and discuss their concerns. While the meeting was closed to the public, the movement’s leadership released a statement saying they had advocated for improved conditions for poor communities in the country’s interior.

In addition to demonstrations against the census and ongoing youth marches, anti-slavery protests also took place in early August. Although slavery has been illegal in Mauritania since 2007, the practice lingers in the country’s interior and there is little assistance available to escaped or former slaves. On August 4, members of the anti-slavery group Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement in Mauritania (IRA-Mauritania) clashed with police forces and family members of an accused slave owner during a sit-in in Nouakchott. Several people were injured, including the IRA-Mauritania president who was briefly hospitalized. Twelve IRA activists were arrested, spurring denunciations from international and domestic human rights groups. President Aziz issued a statement asserting that slavery no longer exists in Mauritania and that the IRA is an unauthorized group.

## **About NDI**

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that has supported democratic institutions and practices in every region of the world for more than two decades. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to establish and strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. The Institute has been engaged in Mauritania since 2003 and opened an office in Nouakchott in 2006.

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