



Mauritania Elections Bulletin

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Summary

Less than one week before the first round of Mauritanian presidential elections, scheduled for July 18, authorities focused on preparations to administer the vote while the leading candidates exchanged heated and often derogatory rhetoric. Polling figures released in the daily newspaper *Le Renouveau* on July 14 revealed tight competition among four candidates: Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (24%), Ahmed Ould Daddah (23%), Massaoud Ould Boulkheir (20%) and Ely Ould Mohamed Vall (12%). The proximity among these candidates in the polls suggests that a second round is most likely inevitable, as no candidate looks poised to achieve an absolute majority. The National Independent Election Commission (CENI) and interior ministry accelerated their efforts to prepare for the election by releasing the definitive electoral list, meeting with candidates' representatives to propose a mutual code of conduct, launching a training of trainers for polling station workers and planning to host international observers representing organizations that comprise the International Contact Group on Mauritania (ICGM). Plans for Mauritians abroad to participate in the election sparked fears of electoral fraud as Mauritania's embassies around the world are staffed almost entirely by Aziz supporters appointed during the military junta's rule.

While these preparations progressed, the tone of campaigning intensified as Aziz hardened his attacks and accusations against his opponents. The former general adopted an increasingly anti-American and anti-Israeli posture and alleged that members of the opposition embezzled funds, but he did not present the public with concrete evidence to support this claim. After Aziz asserted that the army could "save the country" again in the future, his opponents ardently professed that the comment proved Aziz's plans to attempt another *coup* if he does not win the election. Interestingly, four opponents of Aziz—Boulkheir, Daddah, Vall and Jemil Ould Mansour—issued a joint statement for the first time denouncing Aziz's words and calling for strict adherence to the Dakar accord, a compromise agreement signed in late June that included provisions for the election. Amid these exchanges, prominent politicians continued to defect from backing Aziz to pledge support for Daddah.

Background on Leading Candidates

Name	Party	Key Fact
Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz	Union for the Republic (UPR)	Former general, led August 2008 <i>coup d'état</i>
Ahmed Ould Daddah	Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD)	Long-time opposition leader and previous candidate
Massaoud Ould Boulkheir	Progressive Popular Alliance (APP) / National Front for the Defense of Democracy (FNDD)	Speaker of the National Assembly, anti-slavery activist
Ely Ould Mohamed Vall	No party	Former colonel, led 2005 <i>coup d'état</i>

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The issue of the military's political partiality took precedence during the past week. Many of Aziz's attacks involved accusations that his opponents are determined to undermine the military influence. Meanwhile, opposition candidates claimed that Aziz took advantage of his prior position in the military to strengthen his campaign. In their joint statement, Boulkheir, Daddah, Vall and Mansour charged that members of the military

have openly campaigned for Aziz, that Aziz used an army helicopter to travel to a campaign rally and that the former general often appears in campaign posters dressed in his military uniform. The four opposing candidates called on the CENI to step up its oversight of Aziz's campaign and newspaper editorials began to question the role military institutions would play following the election.

Election Administration



Ould Dey chairs a CENI meeting
(Photo courtesy of AMI)

The two administrative bodies tasked with overseeing the elections, the CENI and the interior ministry, held a series of intense meetings this week as election day approached. In a press conference on July 12, CENI president Sid'Ahmed Ould Dey outlined the commission's priorities for the week ahead, including "an action plan focusing on the electoral lists, voter awareness, ballot stamping, addressing disputes, collecting and transmitting results, as well as the creation of a framework for consulting with candidates' representatives." To initiate this process, the CENI visited various government ministries and administrative bodies to present its action plan and solicit their cooperation and assistance. Ould Dey also presented interim president Ba Mamadou Mbare with a list of the commission's concerns based on obstacles encountered during its work.

Earlier in the week, the commission met with all of the candidates' representatives to discuss a proposed code of conduct that would aim to guarantee transparent and ethical behavior during the campaign and on election day. Only four candidates (Aziz, Vall, Boulkheir and Meimou) have thus far signed the agreement; on July 11, Sid'Ahmed Ould Dey, president of the CENI, deplored other candidates' reluctance to support the pact.

Meanwhile, the interior ministry led a training of trainers to provide polling station presidents and employees with updated knowledge on the electoral code and voting procedures. The ministry also presented candidates' representatives, the CENI and experts from the ICGM with the definitive electoral list, which was also officially published on the Internet. The total number of registered voters reached 1,183,447—about one-third of the population and a slight increase over the number of voters in the 2007 elections—spread among 2,485 polling stations across the country. The ministry will also publish the preliminary results of the elections on the same website: www.interieur.gov.mr

Following his meeting with President Mbare, Ould Dey announced that 250 international observers would be deployed to oversee the elections. All of the observers represent the international and non-governmental organizations that comprise the ICGM, including the Arab League, African Union, European Union, International Organization of La Francophonie and Organization of the Islamic Congress. The observers began to arrive in Mauritania on July 13.

For the first time in Mauritania's history, citizens residing abroad are eligible to vote. During a press conference on July 12, the CENI announced that absentee ballots for overseas voting had been produced and distributed to the interior ministry. The issue is not without controversy, however, as ambassadors and embassy staff were appointed by Aziz, leading the opposition to express concerns about the potential for embassies to manipulate the diaspora vote. The electoral lists for expatriates were drafted in advance of the aborted June 6 elections, prior to the Dakar accord, and have not been revised to include additional



The ballot for the July 18 election

voters, unlike the electoral rolls within the country which were updated in early July.

Campaigns

During the past week, heightened negative rhetoric from Aziz's camp provoked a unified response from his opponents. The former general repeatedly accused Boulkheir, Daddah and Vall of embezzling public funds and vowed that his campaign possessed documented proof of these allegations and would release the evidence in a rally on July 11 in Nouakchott. At the rally, however, Aziz announced that his campaign's technical team was unable to display the documents to the crowd on large projection screens, yet he insisted that he had the documents in his possession and would discuss them with the crowd. Many observers consider this outcome as verification that Aziz lacks substantial proof to support his accusations.

Aziz's campaign also increased its incendiary rhetoric linking his opponents to the United States and Israel. He alleged that the FNDD's leadership had traveled to the United States to convince American authorities of the Mauritanian army's anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. None of these claims, however, were backed with tangible evidence. Most significantly, Aziz asserted that the army has always prevented the corrupt from gaining power and declared that "the army that saved the country in the past can do so again in the future." This remark in particular sparked a passionate response from Aziz's opponents, who alleged that if the former general does not win the presidential election, he will again overturn the government.

The director of Boulkheir's campaign organized a press conference on July 7 to announce that the candidate takes Aziz's words very seriously and considers them "a threat of a *coup d'état*," adding that the Front and all democrats will oppose such an overthrow and ensure its failure, as they did the past *coup*. On the charges of financial misappropriation, Boulkheir described Aziz as the greatest embezzler in Mauritania's history, claiming that he diverted \$50 million from Saudi Arabia for use by the Mauritanian army during Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi's presidency.

In a significant development, representatives of Daddah, Boulkheir, Vall and Jemil Ould Mansour, made public a declaration on July 10 to denounce "the words and actions of [Aziz] that transgress the spirit and stipulations of the Dakar agreement and violate democratic values and principles." The declaration further accused Aziz of regarding the election as a "simple parody whose outcome is known in advance" and called on the ICGM to verify the just execution of the Dakar accord. Charging that Aziz has overtly made use of state resources for his campaign needs, these four candidates demanded that the national unity government assume its responsibilities.

While this marks the first time the four candidates have issued a joint statement, Vall's decision to join with the three traditional opposition candidates is particularly noteworthy. The former colonel gave his most political speech during a campaign stop in the country's south; while Aziz's attacks have weakened his candidacy, poll results indicate that he is still a contender for reaching the second round.

Polling results

(Courtesy of Le Renovateur's daily survey conducted on July 15)

Name	% support
Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz	24%
Ahmed Ould Daddah	23%
Massaoud Ould Boulkheir	20%
Ely Ould Mohamed Vall	12%
Ibrahima Moctar Sarr	7%
Jemil Ould Mansour	5%
Hamada Ould Meimou	4%
Saleh Ould Hansen	2%
Kane Hamidou Baba	2%
Undecided	1%

**Note: this is not a scientific poll*

Elsewhere in the campaign, RFD candidate Daddah gave a vibrant homage to former president Abdallahi, commending him for the "great sacrifice" made in his resignation, which Daddah described as a "highly patriotic act." Such words are notable considering that the two faced off in the second round of the 2007 election and

that Abdallahi has adamantly maintained that Daddah took part in the 2008 *coup*. Mansour, who leads the Islamist Tawassoul party, called for restraint from the steady accusations and provocative campaign rhetoric. On July 10, he suggested that the High Authority for the Press and Broadcasting (HAPA), a media regulatory body, organize debates among the candidates to provide an arena for policy debate. Ibrahima Moctar Sarr, a former presidential candidate and supporter of the 2008 *coup*, continued to hold campaign rallies but claimed that he could not travel to the country's interior due to a lack of resources.

Political Alliances

The trend of expanding support among the political class for Daddah and the RFD continued into this week, as the candidate benefited from two additional alliances with senior political figures. A senator from Bombeid and a parliamentarian from Kiffa announced their support for Daddah. Both politicians are cousins of Mohamed Ould Cheikh Mohamed, one of the primary leaders of the 2008 *coup*, so their backing an opposition candidate is particularly significant. On July 13, the vice president of the Senate, Revea Mint Ahmed Nalla shifted her support from Aziz to Daddah, expressing her confidence in his leadership abilities during such a pivotal time. The nationalist Arabe Sawab party also expressed its support for Daddah, switching its allegiance from Aziz on the grounds that he did not adequately consult with the party and address its concerns.



Daddah campaigns in Nouadhibou
(Photo courtesy of ANI)

The Movement for the Democratic Youth (MJD), a prominent youth organization in Mauritania, threw its weight behind Boulkheir. The group praised Boulkheir and the FNDD for their fervent opposition to the 2008 *coup*, which “tarnished the country’s image.” Another anti-*coup* initiative, For Mauritanie, created an FM radio station from its base in Nouakchott. According to its founders, the group unanimously supports Boulkheir’s campaign. More than 20 senators pledged their support to Vall. Such a development may serve to re-empower Vall’s campaign, which had suffered for not actively countering Aziz’s repeated and harsh allegations, including various corruption charges and references to drug trafficking.

Sources: *Nouakchott Info*, *le Calame*, *Quotidien de Nouakchott*, *l’EveilHebdo*, *l’Authentique*, *Agence France Presse*, *Taqadouny*, *Afrique en ligne*, *Walfadjri*, *Mauritanie-Web*, *Biladi*

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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