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*The Post-Coup Context in Mauritania and  
Opportunities for Supporting a Democratic  
Transition*

**Assessment Report**

**September 19-27, 2005**

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## OVERVIEW

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On August 3, 2005, a military *coup d'état* once again deposed a Mauritanian president. While President Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya was in Saudi Arabia for the funeral of King Fahd, senior military officials seized control of the government and overthrew him in a bloodless *coup*. Following the *coup*, a group of military and security officials, calling themselves the Military Council for Justice and Democracy (MCJD), released a statement announcing that elections would be held within two years under the auspices of an independent election commission and issued a constitutional charter outlining how power would be divided during the transitional period. Colonel Ely Ould Mohammed Vall, a close ally of President Taya for more than 20 years, was appointed President of the military *junta*. Vall played a prominent role in the 1984 *coup* that originally brought Taya to power and had been director of national security since 1987.

Shortly after the *coup*, the MCJD appointed a new cabinet and established three inter-ministerial committees to examine the following key areas: the transitional process; the justice system; and good governance. The committees are expected to submit reports on their respective topics by October 27, after which the Military Council has pledged to solicit the feedback of political parties and civil society during a formal consultative process.

Given ongoing programming on the ground and a request from the Mauritanian ambassador to the United States for engagement, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) sent a team to Mauritania from September 19 to 27, 2005, to: 1) assess the post-*coup* political environment; 2) provide recommendations for a meaningful democratic transition; and 3) make recommendations for possible democratic assistance programs.

### *The Coup*

Some observers have asserted that the August *coup* was actually a preemptive move by Taya's closest allies to prevent other factions within the military from seizing control of the country in a bloody manner. Systemic corruption and ongoing ethnic tensions created a situation where Mauritians from each of the three major ethnic groups felt increasingly neglected by the government. Mauritians and observers felt that the current political, economic and social situation in the country was unsustainable and that the country was "on the brink of a societal explosion."

With the country's resources and political institutions historically controlled and appropriated by the minority White Moors (known as *bidans* and of Arabic origin), many Mauritians live in destitution, and hope for a better future was waning within the population. Nearly all of the people with whom the delegation met mentioned that resentment was rapidly growing among all communities, which fostered tribal rivalries, even within the normally unified ruling White Moor community.

The Mauritanian state was, in fact, no longer capable of carrying out its most basic functions: the justice system had already collapsed; the police and the military were increasingly out of control; the central administration was not respecting financial obligations to local municipalities. Meanwhile, the extreme poverty of the Mauritanian people continued unabated. Violence could have sparked at any time out of people's frustration and anger at the abuses and appropriation of state resources by Taya's cronies.

Within the military itself, rank-and-file soldiers, as well as second-tier officers, were becoming increasingly frustrated by conditions in the country; in many cases their own families have been living in extreme poverty. The delegation was told that there was a risk of insurgency emanating from their ranks, which could have led to various forms of violence, including a bloody takeover.

No matter its origin, many observers indicated their view that a violent seizure of power could have then spun out of control, igniting tensions among ethnic communities or provoking an armed response from radical groups, including Islamists with external support. Such a scenario could undermine the stability of the whole region.

Moreover, it is also important to note that Mauritania will soon become an oil producing country. Income from the extraction of this national resource is expected to start flowing into national coffers within the next year. The destabilization of the country at the moment when the oil revenues will begin flowing could have become a powerful force driving a violent uprising.

### ***The Islamist Factor***

Most observers agree that there is a risk of terrorism from radical Islamist groups being trained in Algeria. In June 2005, a Mauritanian military post near the borders of Mali and Algeria was attacked, killing some 15 soldiers. The government said that the attack was conducted by the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which did claim responsibility for the act.

Taya responded by sending additional troops to defend the post and track down the attackers in the desert. This response, which resulted in several more military deaths, was unpopular among the Mauritanian public, even if intended, as some have speculated, to build popular support for his crackdown on Islamists. Moreover, as he became increasingly isolated, even from his closest allies, Taya looked for external support to strengthen his hold by demonstrating solidarity with the international community in the war on terrorism.

The Taya regime's perspective had been that the use of religion as the basic political reference point would result in the imposition of *Sharia'a* as the law of the land if an Islamist group ever took power, even if it was a political party working within the existing political framework. In effect, the regime did not make any distinction between radical and moderate Islamic forces. Based on this interpretation, the government's policy included arresting moderate Islamists, banning Islamic political parties and harassing religious leaders. In the process, it fostered the resentment of large numbers of Muslims across the country. This

remains the *de facto* policy of the MCJD today: While a number of moderate Islamists were freed from jail, the moderate Islamist Party for Democratic Convergence (PCD) remains banned.

### ***A Welcome Coup?***

Given continuing ethnic tensions matched with ongoing human rights violations and the systematic co-opting of state institutions in the service of the ruling elite, the *coup* was perceived by most Mauritians as a much needed change. During its nine-day mission in Mauritania, the delegation found almost unanimous approval and support for the *coup*. The government of President Taya, in power for more than 20 years and itself the product of a *coup* later supported by fraudulent elections, had become unpopular and lacked true legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

Even given the nature of the Taya government and despite general enthusiasm for its ouster by Mauritians, the manner in which it was replaced raises deep concerns about the future of democracy in Mauritania. As experiences have shown elsewhere, including in Mauritania's recent history, undemocratic behavior by governments combined with unprofessional military forces create a disruptive pattern whereby soldiers are emboldened to resort to *coups* whenever they have grievances or political ambitions. A politicized military can also tempt civilian politicians to call on the armed forces to intervene when they cannot win popular support. *Coups* are a fundamental breach of the democratic principle and practice of instituting political change through genuine, democratic elections. Regardless of the stated intentions and the grievances cited by perpetrators, military *coups* jeopardize faith in democratic processes. Democracy, after all, is about the *means* by which political *ends* are pursued.

Following initial declarations against changes of government by force, both political party and civil society actors expressed open support for the MCJD and its stated objectives for a two-year transition period to democracy (or at least an elected civilian government). Some felt an adequate transition period could be shorter than two years, but no one questioned the need for some transition period to make a clean break with the practices of the old regime and institute certain political reforms conducive to fair elections and more democratic institutions.



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## CRITICAL ISSUES AND BENCHMARKS FOR A TRANSITION

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The NDI delegation views the duration of a transition (two years or less) and the substantive content of reforms in the three policy arenas (political reform, good governance and justice) as the crucial issues to be assessed in conjunction with addressing prevailing social problems. Various trade-offs of time, cost, political sensitivity and technical feasibility enter into this equation; but the key questions to be answered are:

**What kind of transition plan will be most likely to lead to stronger, more stable democratic institutions and guarantee representative and fair elections; and what period of time is most appropriate to accomplish this goal?**

Outlined below are key policy issues and benchmarks for assessing the post-*coup* transition in Mauritania.

### A. POLITICAL REFORMS

The MCJD declared that it will hold popular elections on the following six topics in two years, which could mean as many as six polls unless some of these are combined: 1) referendum on amendments to the 1991 Constitution; 2) municipal elections; 3) National Assembly elections; 4) Senate elections; 5) presidential elections; and 6) Senate elections for Mauritians living abroad. The *junta* also asserted that none of its members or any of the ministers in the transitional government will be allowed to run for office in the new government. It has pledged that the current government will maintain absolute neutrality in all electoral processes and will create a new, independent electoral commission to administer the elections. If adhered to and implemented fully, these three stated policies could augur well for a positive democratic transition period. However, a number of steps must be taken to assure Mauritians and the international community that a transition is fully embodying the reforms necessary for long-term sustainability.

#### *Constitutional Referendum*

The MCJD has spoken in favor of a constitutional amendment that would limit the president to two terms in office. Government officials are open to whether the term should be four, five or six years; but the apparent preference is for the shorter term, given the eligibility for re-election. The delegation also views the shorter term as more appropriate. Additionally, the MCJD and the government cited the need to eliminate Article 104,<sup>1</sup> a laudable move from the delegation's perspective. This article gives undue powers to the

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<sup>1</sup> Interlocutors explained that Article 104 was inserted after voters approved the constitution by referendum in 1991.

president by grandfathering in several previous decrees, such as administrative consignment (i.e., house arrest) used previously against Taya's political opponents.

In addition to addressing these issues, the planned Independent Election Commission should be given constitutional status with subsequent legislation providing greater detail concerning its attributes. Also, given Mauritania's record of social injustice, including slavery and forced deportation, language in the current constitution concerning the equality of all citizens before the law should be strengthened, perhaps even as a bill of citizen rights. This amendment should include clear language stating that no person shall be subject to any form of involuntary servitude or bondage. While outright slavery is outlawed in Mauritania, most observers say that various forms still persist along ethnic lines according to local customs.<sup>2</sup>

The *junta* has committed to holding consultations with political parties and civil society on the content of the proposed referendum after the three inter-ministerial committees present their reports by the two-month deadline of October 27. Adequate time for these consultations should be ensured to enable the widest possible range of actors to comment and participate in deliberations. The popular referendum is tentatively scheduled for some 10 months into the transitional period (i.e., June-July 2006).

### ***Electoral Processes***

The fundamental question for all planned elections, as well as for the constitutional referendum, is: What are the essential preconditions and necessary elements for a truly representative and fair election(s)? One of these is already promised; namely, the institutionalization of an impartial and independent electoral commission. Almost by definition, this will also require adoption of a new election law governing the conduct and administration of elections. However, are these steps sufficient to provide the foundation for a new and stable democratic political system? Based on the delegation's assessment of the Mauritanian political environment, it seems that other actions should be taken to achieve stability and viable democratic institutions, particularly under a scenario in which the MCJD exercises power for a full two years. In other words, if the MCJD stays in power for a full two years its reform agenda should be more ambitious; and the international community should insist on that as a condition for accepting the MCJD's "legitimacy."

### **Voter List and Census**

An accurate and comprehensive voter registration list is an essential element for representative and fair elections, as is confidence in that list. The delegation heard many complaints about the quality of the current voter list, which is assembled by commissions composed of various local government officials. As outlined above, several people mentioned that the list has been manipulated by these officials and others. For example, some asserted that supporters of the ruling Republican, Democratic and Social Party (PRDS)

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<sup>2</sup> Mauritania has officially banned slavery three times. The former government denied accusations that slavery is still practiced in the country. A local human rights NGO, *SOS Esclaves*, which focuses on eradicating slavery from the country, was banned by the Ministry of Interior until April 2005.

were illegally bused to other locations (primarily Afro-Mauritanian regions) to register where the impact of their vote would be maximized for the greatest electoral gain.

The Ministry of Interior estimates that the voter list is roughly 80 percent reliable. A scientific test of the accuracy of the list with an independent audit should be conducted, using a random sample survey methodology. This method has been used effectively by a variety of international and local organizations in countries as varied as Azerbaijan, Guyana and Peru. If the list is at least 80 percent reliable, the election commission will only need to update it, adding, for example, those who were previously excluded or have come of age and deleting those who are deceased.

If, however, the list is less than 80 percent accurate (considered more or less a minimum acceptable standard), the election commission will need to conduct a new voter registration process. This would increase the accuracy of the list and allow all Mauritians to approach the elections with a stronger sense of credibility and inclusiveness. A sufficient registration process would require a major outreach effort and public awareness campaign to cover not only the cities but also the often isolated and difficult-to-reach rural populations in the interior of the country.

Renewed attention should also be given to the issuance of citizen identity cards used for voter registration, which is primarily based on information derived from a census. The delegation was informed that an individual's census receipt serves as sufficient proof to receive an identity card. Though the most recent census was conducted in 2000, no data concerning the population composition of the country and its geographic distribution has been published for more than 20 years. An adequate census update would involve: 1) adding those individuals who were not included in the previous census; 2) providing identity cards to those who were previously included in the census but were not included on the voter list and/or had their cards confiscated; and 3) addressing the exiled Afro-Mauritanian community. Updated census information would also be required to support a redistricting process, which will be discussed later in this report.

As detailed below, troubling events from 1989 to 1991 led to the deportation of a significant number of Afro-Mauritians. Including this exiled community is perhaps one of the most difficult issues in accurately updating census information and administering fully inclusive elections. Stations at the borders could be established to register deported citizens to vote, either in their declared previous places of residence or at special polling stations set up along the boarder, waiving the six-month residency requirement otherwise applicable. At the request of the Mauritanian government, international organizations could assist in this task, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the International Organization for Migration (IOM), both of which have expertise in this area.

### Election Code and System

The constitutional referendum and municipal, senatorial<sup>3</sup> and presidential elections could technically be administered after concerns regarding the voter list and census are addressed.

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<sup>3</sup> Under the current electoral law, the Senate is elected indirectly by regional councils.

However, in order to prepare for National Assembly elections, the electoral system and districting scheme should be revised.

The current electoral code is a patchwork of decrees that needs to be replaced by a coherent, modern electoral code based on democratic standards. Presently, the rules generate confusion and are difficult to enforce with transparency and uniformity. Moreover, the actual decrees do not provide for a neutral election commission. For example, the electoral process is supervised by an administrative commission, which is presided over by the governor or *wali*, a civil servant in the Ministry of Interior. A separate decree gives another local commission, presided over by the regional judge or *bakim*, the mandate to establish the voter list.

In the current confusing electoral code, districts with fewer than 31,000 people elect one deputy; districts with more than 31,000 people elect two deputies using a list system. Runoff elections are held if candidates do not receive a majority in the first round of the vote, but the winning party captures both seats. In 2001, opposition parties made small gains when a limited proportional system was instituted in three of the largest cities (Nouakchott, Nouadhibou and Selebaby) using single, multi-member districts. In total, there were 17 deputies elected under this proportional representation, with 11 of them representing Nouakchott alone. Opposition figures considered this particular political development as an indication that the simple majority system in Mauritania provides an unfair advantage to the ruling party. The reform of the overall electoral system is an important precondition for the legislative elections to be fair and meaningful, as well as a critical factor for a successful national reconciliation process.

The PRDS is by far the largest, best-organized and best-financed political party in the country. In previous elections the weak and poorly funded opposition was particularly outmatched in the difficult-to-reach rural areas, where local civil servants have been at the service of the PRDS. Related to this is the fact that, under the current system, party financing is based on the number of votes a party receives in local elections. Given their domination of local elections because of built-in system biases, the PRDS is receiving an unfair share of public funds. Current formulas for public financing of parties, particularly for election activities, need to be revised to offset the advantage enjoyed by the former ruling party's privileged position. In addition to reviewing political party funding, oversight of party election expenses needs to be addressed.

Political parties and civil society should be allowed and take advantage of opportunities to participate in the consultation process concerning the most appropriate and fair electoral system during and/or after the inter-ministerial commission releases its report at the end of October 2005.

### Redistricting

Without reliable census data, it is difficult to determine an appropriate districting scheme for municipalities or the National Assembly. All of the opposition political parties that the delegation met with stated firmly that the districting of the municipalities has been

manipulated by the state. Given apparent demographic changes, it is likely that the existing municipal and Assembly district boundaries and their populations do not meet the basic principle of equal representation by having roughly equal populations per representative. Following a census update and the decision on an appropriate electoral system, these boundaries should be examined and redrawn. The need for redistricting will be especially acute if the new electoral law remains based on a simple majority or first-past-the-post system, where specific bounded constituencies are used.

Representatives from an Afro-Mauritanian political party argued strongly that the current district distribution ensures that the populated Afro-Mauritanian communities remain under represented. They further stated that redistricting is an essential condition for fair elections. In addition to respecting the equal representation principle, the new boundaries should take into consideration the number of citizens per district and the size of the district territories given Mauritania's geographic expanse and sparsely populated desert regions.

### ***The Electoral Environment***

In addition to the formal procedures and institutional arrangements for representative and fair elections, other environmental conditions strongly affect the quality and integrity of an electoral process. These "level playing field" issues affect the ability of political actors to compete on equal terms without built-in advantages for one side or the other. A number of concerns regarding these types of issues need to be addressed in Mauritania.

The MCJD has already taken steps to dismiss some of the heads of state-run companies and other public bodies who were clear loyalists from the former regime. This is a positive development that helps to dismantle the current power structure within the state. Officials responsible for corrupting the electoral process in the past should also be dismissed to help ensure that no favored party is in a position to use state resources to support election campaigns.

Civil society organizations in particular emphasized to the delegation the low level of civic awareness among the general population, especially among rural populations and women. They cited the pressing need for civic and voter education programs on the basic principles and values of democracy, given the fact that most Mauritians have known only autocratic regimes and have never experienced democratic political practices or participation. They also argued in favor of adequate time for discussions on proposed political reforms. A meaningful consultative process, which the MCJD has promised to the political parties and civil society, is the basis for their support of a full two-year transition period – a position the delegation found surprising.

### ***Duration of the Transition***

The transition period, as described by the current government, is currently scheduled to last no more than two years. A strong argument can be made for a much shorter transition period, given the *de jure* illegitimacy of the Military Council in power. For example, the various elections and the referendum could be combined and compressed into a shorter time

period. Experiences with military regimes elsewhere, in fact, suggest that the longer a *junta* remains in power, the less likely it is to give up the reins as originally promised.

Initially, the delegation agreed with this argument. However, following more comprehensive consultations with Mauritians and an assessment of the structures within the political environment, the delegation recognized that a two-year transition, if implemented as suggested in this report, could be more beneficial by creating a stronger foundation for a successful, sustainable democratic transition.

Early elections would likely recreate the previous (and current) political structure, given the advantages enjoyed by dominant groups that were left undisturbed by this *coup*. Failure to take the necessary time to revise the electoral system and redraw electoral districts would preserve an unlevel playing field in legislative elections. This could operate to the particular disadvantage of certain ethnic groups and would undermine the basic legitimacy of any electoral process and the representative government that results from it. It could also lead to a *status quo ante* political environment rather than the stability needed to form the foundation of a new, democratically elected civilian government. Without significant systemic changes, a pattern of cyclical military *coups* could continue to be the means to express opposition and redress grievances.

The August 2005 *coup* enjoyed broad popular support because it overthrew a regime that must be judged as dictatorial rather than democratic. A rush to early elections without improvements in the political and electoral environment may be less preferable than a more ambitious, two-year transition that offers better chances for creating the conditions for a more credible and sustainable democratic political system. Such a position is defensible, however, only if the MCJD remains strictly faithful to its stated principles for a transition and, in the delegation's view, broadens that agenda to deal with other important issues.

*"We want elections in two years; if it can happen sooner, all the better."*

- Colonel Ely Ould  
Mohammed Vall, President  
of the MCJD

It can be argued that Mauritania was a *de facto* one-party state with a weak façade of a multi-party system. A reasonable period of time, perhaps the two-year period, is also needed to give the disadvantaged parties time to organize, recruit, develop policy programs and strengthen their ability to compete on an equal footing in representative elections. With a new electoral commission, the political parties and voters could make use of the experience and practice gained from various elections spread out over a two-year transition period.

However, experience from other countries suggests that voter fatigue sets in when too many elections are held within a relatively short time span. It could be preferable, for example, to combine the constitutional referendum with local elections, which would serve to test the strength of the political parties without the high stakes of the parliamentary and presidential elections; and later combine the national elections of the Assembly and the president (the indirect Senate elections would presumably be held on a different date). Other electoral combinations might also be used. This would also reduce the overall costs of the elections.

In order to justify a two-year transition period, the delegation's suggestions go beyond what has been laid out thus far in the policy statements of the MCJD. Two years is a long time for an unelected government to exercise power; therefore, its reform agenda should be more ambitious if it hopes to find support from the Mauritanian people and the international community.

## **B. GOOD GOVERNANCE**

While an ambitious reform agenda should be undertaken during a two-year transition period, many Mauritians emphasized that they lack confidence in the current government's ability to fairly and impartially address certain issues. Given that the *coup* essentially decapitated the government while leaving much of the old ruling party apparatus in place, including many actors who were responsible for serious abuses of power, the country would be better served if some critical systemic and reconciliatory issues, while important, were left for a legitimate elected government to address.

### ***Corruption and Public Finances***

For many years Mauritania has suffered from institutionalized corruption embedded within a sanctioned system of patronage. The MCJD stated that it has begun to address this issue by initiating a general audit of government institutions and state-owned companies. Auditing the current state of public finances to rid the system of past corruption is an important first step that would allow the future elected government to begin with a clean set of books. Many Mauritians affirmed that this move, if implemented, would increase their confidence in the government, and they agree that cleaning up the corruption is an essential step in a transition process.

However, many individuals asserted that they would be suspicious of any long-term decisions made by the MCJD in the realm of institutional financial reform, as the current government still includes individuals who were responsible for and profited from corruption during Taya's reign. They fear that the current leaders could bias the reforms in order to continue to direct many of the economic benefits to an elite ruling class at the expense of other ethnic groups.

### ***Transparency in the Extractive Industries***

In addition to the fisheries industry, the other primary source of revenue in Mauritania is derived from the mining industry, and oil is expected to begin flowing within the next year. To demonstrate commitment to transparency in these two extractive industries, the MCJD signed the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). EITI comprises government and nongovernmental entities that pledge to disclose and make transparent the amount companies pay and to whom they pay it. The government also divulges how much it receives and how the money is spent.

Signing the EITI is an important positive step toward combating corruption, which was resisted by Taya's government. However, given the important nature of an economic shift, it

would be preferable if decisions concerning how the oil revenue in particular is allocated and spent in the long-term were made by the future democratically elected government.

### C. JUDICIAL REFORM

Previously, without an independent election commission, the Ministry of Interior was entirely responsible for election administration, allowing the government to fully define and control the rules of the game. Mauritanian judges, who were at the service of the government and the ruling party, never fully exercised their responsibilities in the electoral process and were used to help eliminate the opposition.

In the proposed upcoming referendum and elections, the judicial system should have an important role to play in securing the legality of the electoral process as well as the neutrality of civil servants. Immediate steps should be taken to select a core number of honest and qualified judges who would be responsible with overseeing the electoral process. To effectively perform their duties, these judges would require a significant amount of training, particularly concerning the new electoral law and electoral system. As in some other countries, judges could also be given a more specific role in the administration of the voting process.

However, the judicial system as a whole is in need of serious reforms that would likely be impossible to complete during the two-year transition period. For the same reasons cited above, it would be preferable for a credible elected government to undertake these reforms. Some of these reforms would include the creation of an independent council of judges that would play an important role in appointing magistrates, establishing and implementing a code of ethics for judges and defining judicial training needs.

### D. SOCIAL ISSUES

To break the cycle of *coups d'état* and to prevent the need for similar transitional process(es) in the near future, the government should also use this two-year period to address other systemic and social issues that have plagued Mauritanian society for many years (some since the country's independence in 1960).

#### ***Ethnic Patchwork***

Traditionally a nomadic country, Mauritania has an extremely diverse and complex society with many clan rivalries as well as racial and ethnic divisions. The country is primarily composed of three ethnic groups, each containing multiple tribal sub-sects: *Bidan*, *Harratin* and Afro-Mauritanian. The *Bidans* and *Harratins* primarily populate northern Mauritania, while the Afro-Mauritanians are largely concentrated in the south, closer to the Senegal River.

*“White Moors are found throughout the region, not just in our country. If Mauritania destabilizes, the entire region is at risk.”*

- Islamist Party Leader



*Bidans*, otherwise referred to as “White Moors,” are closely tied to their Arab identity and speak a dialect of Arabic known as *Hassaniya*. This ethnic group has constituted the ruling class of the country since its independence. While the *Harratins*, also referred to as “Black Moors,” are former slaves and trace their roots back to sub-Saharan Africa, they have adopted the culture and language of their former masters and closely associate themselves with an Arab identity. The Afro-Mauritanians, predominately Muslim, have strong ties to sub-Saharan Africa and primarily speak French as well as their native tribal languages. They are divided into three principal tribes: the *Poular*, the *Woloff* and the *Soninke*. Afro-Mauritanians and *Harratins* are often described as the disadvantaged and/or disenfranchised classes of Mauritians.

While there is no census information indicating the population composition of the country, it is generally believed that the *Bidans* represent a minority of the population but have traditionally dominated the political and economic spheres. Combined, the other two ethnic groups constitute a majority of the population, but the exact percentages are currently unknown.

### ***Explosive Tensions***

In 1989, relations between Senegal and Mauritania became increasingly contentious based on ethnic tensions between the White Moor minority in Senegal and the Senegalese government. When White Moors were expelled from Senegal, the Mauritanian government retaliated by launching state-sponsored pogroms directed at Afro-Mauritanians. During what many call the “89-91 Events,” Afro-Mauritanians were tortured and killed, and hundreds were purged from the state bureaucracy and military. A large number of Afro-Mauritanians were forced to relocate to neighboring Senegal and Mali. To date, no security officials have been charged or tried, and many of the Afro-Mauritanians have not returned to their land nor have they been able to reclaim it. Former President Taya’s government asserted that all were free to return if they could prove their citizenship.

These divisive events constitute a potentially explosive issue between the government and the Afro-Mauritanian community. During the delegation’s meetings, leaders from the Afro-Mauritanian community requested that the government acknowledge these incidents as human rights abuses, provide some indemnities for the victims, return land and previous employment positions and allow for a collective repatriation. The 89–91 Events and ongoing structural inequalities are a continuing source of resentment and frustration for a significant portion of the Mauritanian population that could easily boil over if ignored. These problems were raised repeatedly in meetings and clearly remain an open sore in the body politic. As long as these issues are ignored, the country will continue to suffer from instability and the risk of cyclical *coups* and destabilizing violence, even if technically sound elections and other reforms are implemented.

*“There is no need to do a witch hunt; but the current problems need to be addressed.”*

- Afro-Mauritanian Party  
Leader

As part of a process of social healing and national reconciliation, these issues should be acknowledged and addressed by the MCJD if it remains in power for a period of time nearing two years. Some wounds will take years to heal, but the current government could reduce tensions and increase its credibility by formally endorsing a national reconciliation, acknowledging past acts against certain ethnic groups, including the voices of all ethnic groups in reform dialogues and ensuring that elections are as inclusive as possible. After fair and inclusive elections, the new legitimate government could be responsible for an official reconciliation process. During the reconciliation process, the new government should formally address issues such as indemnity, as well as land and job claims. In the interim, the MCJD should endorse a national reconciliation and, as a first step, publicly recognize the abuses committed against the Afro-Mauritanian population. The Council should also take steps to secure voting rights for displaced populations and permit the free return of displaced persons as a prelude to collective repatriation under a new government.

## **PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS**

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During meetings, many Mauritians appealed for immediate and substantial assistance in several areas. The president of the MCJD and government ministers requested that NDI monitor and participate broadly in the process; civil society organizations called for civic education and voter awareness programs, as well as expert support to increase women's role in the decision-making process; and political parties requested a broad range of technical assistance and expertise in leveling the political playing field and preparing them for elections.

To help bring about stronger, more stable democratic institutions as well as representative and fair elections, NDI and other organizations should engage in a wide range of programming, as long as the current government continues to demonstrate a commitment to genuine democratic reforms and honors its pledge to stay in power no more than two years. Based on meetings and discussions during and following this mission, political actors in Mauritania have regularly called for such ongoing engagement and technical assistance throughout the transition. These have included leaders within all of the major political parties, the Prime Minister, the Ministers of Interior and Justice and President Vall himself. The United Nations (UN) will be finalizing the findings of an assessment team that is being mobilized based on a formal request by the Military Council for UN assistance in election preparations; and the European Union (EU) is conducting an assessment in support of the Cotonou Process to determine how to engage in the transition.

Certain areas of activity and assistance are essential for a credible and meaningful transition. Others, while they are not completely necessary for the transition, could be successful based on the unique political openings presented during this period. Women should be mainstreamed into each of the programs described below.

### **SUPPORT TO THE ELECTORAL PROCESS**

#### ***Inter-Ministerial Committee***

Support should be given to the inter-ministerial committee dealing with elections and political processes. NDI could immediately make available an on-the-ground international elections expert who would provide support and advice on a broad range of topics, such as assisting in the technical organization of a formal consultative process with political parties and civil society. Additionally, NDI could provide consultations on and comparative examples of various types of independent election commissions, electoral systems and electoral codes. This information could assist the committee in choosing the most appropriate system given Mauritania's historical and cultural context.

### ***Technical Support***

To help administer representative, fair and meaningful elections, further technical assistance should be supplied in the following areas:

- Test the reliability of the voter's list, as explained above.
- Provide expertise regarding a redistricting process.
- Provide technical training to local groups to monitor a transitional period and the electoral processes.
- Provide international experts to monitor the elections, in coordination with local groups.

## **STRENGTHENING POLITICAL PARTIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

### ***Consultation Processes***

If political party and civil society feedback are taken into account during the formal consultative process, this period could be a crucial opportunity to level the political playing field and address systemic political problems that have plagued the country for years. Technical and strategic assistance should be provided to relevant actors during the consultative process, including actors that encompass the entire political spectrum. Support could come in the following forms:

- One-on-one consultations to help relevant actors from across the spectrum analyze the reports and provide strategic comments (NDI is already working with parties on this process).
- Forums conducted by international experts on various relevant topics to disseminate comparative information to political parties and civil society.
- Roundtables to allow local actors to exchange information, discuss ideas, and perhaps collectively develop responses. These roundtables could be held with both civil society and political parties, either collectively or separately.

### ***Political Parties***

Given the problems and challenges outlined above, political parties are perhaps in the direst need of support and would benefit from intensive programming in several areas. In addition to helping them during the consultative process, the following programs could be undertaken:

- Voter Registration. Depending upon if and how the voter list is updated, help political parties to organize voter registration drives.

- Message and Platform Development. Provide training on message development to political parties and convey best practices for developing platforms that resonate with Mauritanian voters.
- Campaign Training and Voter Outreach. With several elections possible in the near future, conduct campaign training schools to train senior party leadership and regional political party activists on voter identification and outreach, public speaking, media outreach and voter contact. A train-the-trainer component could also be introduced to increase the reach of the program.
- Political Party Poll Watching. Provide training to political parties to develop their own cadre of pollwatchers with the skills necessary to understand their duties and rights, as well as the electoral laws of the country. Opposition parties traditionally have not had the freedom or means to place pollwatchers in polling stations, particularly in the interior of the country where election fraud is more likely to occur.

### *Civil Society*

Funding and technical assistance should be provided for the creation of a national “observatory,” composed of credible and neutral local NGOs. Its mission would be to monitor and report on the various steps of a transition and reform process and to hold the government to its promises. These NGOs could also constitute the core groups responsible for monitoring and observing the referendum and elections.

*“People do not understand the purpose of political parties here, as a vehicle of the people’s voice and power of the people.”*

- Civil Society Leader

Additionally, funding and technical assistance could be made available to support a civic education campaign designed to raise awareness about the importance of citizen participation in the democratic process. This program could include activities such as civic forums, roundtables and town hall meetings across the country. Similarly, help is needed to launch a credible and well-organized voter awareness campaign by using radio, television and other

media such as small traveling plays that have been part of successful awareness campaigns in places such as Morocco.

### **ENHANCING PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES**

The following programs could have an important positive long-term impact creating a more sustainable democratic transition in Mauritania:

Women’s Political Participation. Conduct a women’s candidate training program and support women’s NGOs. Some NGOs expressed interest in comparative materials regarding legislative quotas for women, while others asked for general information concerning women’s political empowerment. This information could be disseminated in roundtables and forums and provide a specific and separate training program for women running for office.

Public Opinion Research. Use focus groups to increase citizen input in the decision-making process. Political parties could use focus group research as a tool to develop and refine their messages and platforms. The inter-ministerial committees and the election commission could also use focus group methodologies during the consultative process to ensure that a broad spectrum of civil society has the opportunity to comment on the committee reports. Focus groups are also a useful method of disseminating information to a broad audience, as has been discovered with NDI's focus group center in Morocco.

Media training. Train journalists on the role of the press in a democratic society and provide them with technical skills concerning how to cover elections and candidates. Given the government's recent lifting on censure of independent media, the development of journalistic capacities will become more critical.

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# APPENDIX I: DELEGATION BIOGRAPHIES

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**Chuck Costello** is a senior program development specialist and manager of democracy and governance programs, with 30 years of experience for USAID and other organizations in successfully developing and managing rule of law, civil society development, institutional reform, elections and anticorruption programs in Latin America and elsewhere. During a distinguished career at USAID, Mr. Costello directed the USAID Center for Democracy and Governance; served as USAID Mission Director in El Salvador, Ecuador, and Guatemala; served as USAID Deputy Mission Director in Kenya; and headed USAID Office of Central American Affairs, among other senior positions. He retired from USAID as a bureau Deputy Assistant Administrator with personal rank of Career Minister and the Distinguished Career Service Award. As Deputy Chief of Party for RTI in Iraq in 2003-04, Mr. Costello managed an ambitious USAID-funded Local Governance Project, and from 1999 to 2003, he directed the Democracy Program at The Carter Center, for which he designed and led election, rule of law and civil society programs in China, East Timor, Guyana, Indonesia, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Peru and Zambia. He has conducted democracy and governance assessments and evaluations in Jamaica, Colombia and Albania (upcoming). He has a J.D. degree in Law.

**Tricia Keller** is the Mauritania program manager for NDI's Middle East and North Africa team. Based in Rabat, Morocco, Ms. Keller also manages NDI's first focus group center, *The People's Mirror*, and serves as the coordinator for NDI's North Africa programs. Her primary area of expertise is qualitative opinion research, and she advises on the design and implementation of several of the Institute's focus group programs. Prior to her work in the region, Ms. Keller served as a Washington-based program officer for NDI programs in Kuwait, Mauritania, Morocco and the West Bank and Gaza. During her tenure with NDI, she has helped to implement programs to build the capacity of political parties, legislative bodies, women and youth and has provided training to women candidates running in local elections in Morocco. Before joining NDI, Ms. Keller worked for the Commerce Department at the U.S. Embassy in Paris and in the international marketing department of a multi-national corporation. Ms. Keller holds a Masters degree in international business.

**Gérard Latulippe** is the Resident Director of NDI's program in Morocco. He is also the Institute's Senior Representative for the Maghreb and an expert in parliamentary affairs for the Middle East. In addition to his post in Morocco, Mr. Latulippe has worked for NDI as a trainer in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Georgia, Iraq and Jordan. He has more than 30 years of experience in leadership within Canadian political parties at the provincial and federal levels. In Québec, he served as Minister of Public Security and was a member of the Québec National Assembly. Mr. Latulippe has also held public office positions in Québec such as the Québec General Delegate to Mexico and Brussels, and the

Deputy Minister for the Ministry of International Affairs. Prior to his entry into politics, Mr. Latulippe practiced law for 18 years, specializing in administrative and labor law. Subsequent to his career in the public sector, he was called on to manage projects financed by international aid agencies in Uruguay, Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Paraguay, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Mr. Latulippe holds a Master's degree in International Politics from *l'Université Libre de Bruxelles*, a license degree in law and a diploma in Administration Affairs from *l'Université de Montréal*.



APPENDIX II: INITIAL  
STATEMENT OF THE  
MILITARY COUNCIL FOR  
JUSTICE AND DEMOCRACY  
AUGUST 2005

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In the name of God, the Merciful, the Gracious.

The national armed forces and security forces have unanimously decided to put a definitive end to the oppressive activities of the defunct authority, which our people have suffered from during the past years.

These activities have led to a severe deviation which has begun to threaten the future of our nation.

The national armed forces and security forces have decided to institute a Military Council for Justice and Democracy.

This council is committed before the Mauritanian people to create the appropriate circumstances for an open and transparent democracy.

This will enable the civil society and all political activists to participate with complete freedom.

Our armed forces and security forces will not rule for longer than the necessary period required to prepare and create the genuine democratic institutions.

This period will not exceed two years at the most.

Finally, the council confirms Mauritania's commitment to all the international treaties and agreements which it has signed.