



Mauritania Elections Bulletin



Issue No. 1: June 1 to July 15, 2011

Political Background

On June 1, 2011 the Mauritanian interior ministry announced a revision of the national voter registry in anticipation of constitutionally-mandated legislative and municipal elections to be held on October 1. The following week, President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz confirmed the date, claiming “the mandate of a member of parliament (MP) is five years; that is to say that October 1, there must be elections, period. There will be no legal vacuum.” In response, several opposition parties have threatened to boycott. As the parties attempt to find common ground for a national dialogue, Mauritanian citizens are increasingly pressing for change through protests and strikes. Since February, many young Mauritians – claiming inspiration from the Arab Spring – have been taking to the streets to demand political reforms and the removal of the military from political affairs.

Political Alliances

Following the president’s announcement, Ahmed Ould Daddah, leader of the opposition Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD) and former 2009 presidential candidate, announced that the RFD would not participate unless opposition parties had a say in the preparations. Another opposition party, the Union of Forces for Progress (UFP) also threatened to boycott, citing concerns over the integrity of the 2009 presidential elections and outdated voter lists. In contrast, the Popular Progressive Alliance (APP) immediately initiated a campaign to mobilize support, while simultaneously calling for dialogue with the government to resolve the current tensions. Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, APP leader and president of the National Assembly, has positioned himself as a mediator between the majority and opposition factions.

On June 28, opposition parties consolidated their demands and presented President Aziz with a platform outlining their desire for an official dialogue on issues including acceptable standards for elections. The COD platform requested direct dialogue with the president, culminating in an official agreement and the establishment of a joint majority-opposition monitoring committee to oversee the agreement’s implementation. The platform also stipulated that the dialogue should take place in Nouakchott, but that parties would have the right to appeal for international mediation in the case of a stalemate. After hosting meetings with the presidential majority, President Aziz rejected three major aspects of the COD’s platform: the adoption of the 2009 Dakar Agreement as the basis for any dialogue, establishment of the joint monitoring commission and potential use of international mediation.

The National Assembly of Mauritania: Political Party Overview

	Party Name	MPs
Coalition of the Majority (CPM)	Union for the Republic (UPR)	60
	Republican Party for Democracy and Renewal (PRDR)	4
	Union for Democracy and Progress (UDP)	3
	National Pact for Democracy and Development (ADIL)	2
	Union of the Democratic Center (UCD)	1
	Movement for Refounding (MPR)	1
	Democratic Renewal (RD)	1
	Total	72
Coordination of the Democratic Opposition (COD)	Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD)	6
	Union of Forces of Progress (UFP)	5
	National Rally for Reform and Development (Tewassoul)	4
	Mauritanian Party for Unity and Change (HATEM)	1
	Popular Progressive Appliance (APP)	3
	El Wiam	3
	Popular Rally of Mauritanian People (PRPM)	1
	Total	23
TOTAL		95

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Meanwhile, the Mauritanian Party for Unity and Change (Hatem) and National Rally for Reform and Development (Tewassoul) left the presidential majority and joined the Coordination of the Democratic Opposition (COD).

COD Platform Priority Issues for Dialogue:

- Consolidation of national unity
- Electoral law and framework
- Depoliticization and professionalization of the government
- Role of the opposition
- Media rights
- Independence of judiciary
- Role of the army

Spokespeople for both parties cited disagreements with policy decisions and frustration with the lack of consultation within the majority coalition. These defections occurred amid a spate of resignations and dissent within the majority parties, including the president's Union for the Republic (UPR). Some political analysts speculate that the indefinite postponement of the constitutionally mandated April 2011 senatorial elections was not – as the president had claimed – a concession to opposition parties who were threatening to boycott, but was instead due to disagreements within the UPR over the choice of candidates.

Responding to the COD platform, the president issued his own call for dialogue to “strengthen democracy, national unity and civil liberties.” The president's statement claimed he was willing to discuss “seriously and without any taboo issues” topics including the independence of the judiciary, role of the opposition, electoral preparations and media. Notably, the president's list of topics excluded several key opposition concerns, including the role of the Mauritanian military in civilian affairs.

The following week, the COD released a statement complaining that the government had not yet taken any steps to demonstrate any intent for genuine dialogue. Individual parties have since scheduled internal strategy sessions, with Tewassoul and RFD planning to hold their discussions on July 17 and 21 respectively. Following the parties' internal discussions, the COD will convene another meeting at the end of July.

Election Administration

The National Independent Election Commission (CENI), the multipartisan body charged with electoral preparations, was disbanded after the 2009 presidential elections. Although the COD has demanded the reconstitution of the CENI, the government has mandated the Ministry of the Interior with all electoral preparations.

Since early June, the interior ministry has been reviewing the country's electoral lists, a process that has been the subject of many complaints, particularly by citizens in the rural interior who often lack access to birth certificates and national identity cards. It is questionable whether the ministry will be able to conclude the revision process before its self-mandated deadline of August 31, given that the ministry's own official estimates demonstrate that approximately 600,000 Mauritanians (18 percent of the country's 3.28 million inhabitants) are unregistered.

Despite the rapidly approaching electoral date, there has been no communication from the government regarding candidate registration or whether citizen monitors will be allowed. Given the compressed electoral timeframe, ongoing attempts at dialogue and mounting public concern over the registration process, unofficial reports are circulating that the elections will be postponed. Although the parliament held its final session on July 7, reports in the local press claim that President Aziz and his advisors are currently reviewing the 2006 electoral code and that an extraordinary session of the National Assembly will be convened in September to pass the president's suggested revisions to the electoral law. One possible solution that some parties are speculating the president might adopt, would be to claim that the legislative mandate began on May 2007, the first sitting of the National Assembly elected in October 2006. Through this interpretation, elections could be held by May 27, 2012 and still be arguably consistent with the constitution.

Civil Society

While political parties are attempting to find common ground with the presidency, the February 25 youth movement continues to advocate for policies more responsive to the needs of young Mauritanians. Protesting unemployment and a recent deal between the Mauritanian government and the Chinese Poly Hondone Pelagic Fisheries Co. Ltd, youth activists tried to lock the doors of a commune in the northern city of Nouadhibou, chanting “no to Chinese society, no to the sellout of our resources.” During the demonstration, several members of the February 25 movement were injured in clashes with police.



COD presents platform for dialogue at press conference (ANI)

Since its launch in early June, the Mauritanian government's attempts to revise the voter registry have been increasingly decried as "discriminatory" by the African-Mauritanian population. There have been reports of officials targeting African-Mauritanians in northern communities with humiliating questions to verify their ethnic backgrounds. A group of young African-Mauritanians recently used Facebook to launch an initiative, "*touche pas à ma nationalité*" ["Don't touch my citizenship"] and are now organizing sit-ins and small-scale demonstrations. On July 11, the UFP called the process "doubtful in its goals, dangerous for national unity and chaotic in its procedures" and requested an audit of the registry office.



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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