



# Mauritania Elections Bulletin



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## Political Background

On July 28, the Mauritanian government announced that legislative and municipal elections will be held on October 16, 2011. This announcement surprised opposition parties which had been preparing to negotiate a new electoral calendar during an upcoming scheduled “dialogue” with the president. While the Coordination of the Democratic Opposition (COD) will issue an official response to the announcement in the next few days, parties are already threatening to boycott.

## Political Alliances

For the last few weeks, the Mauritanian political landscape has been dominated by the pending dialogue between President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and the opposition parties.



*Bettah, Aziz, and Boulkheir (Cridem)*

Massaoud Ould Boulkheir, president of the National Assembly and leader of the opposition Popular Progressive Alliance (APP), continued to mediate between the presidency and the COD. Before the

July 28 announcement, Boulkheir called on the president to delay the elections, which were originally scheduled for October 1. The president has claimed that since the current parliament was elected in October 2006, the country must hold elections by the end of October to avoid a legislative vacuum. While President Aziz may be offering the October 16 date as a compromise, the opposition is unlikely to be satisfied by a postponement of two weeks.

The stakes and the expectations for dialogue are high. Mohamed Jamil Mansour, president of the opposition National Rally for Reform and Development (Tewassoul), recently claimed that, “the Mauritians will achieve through dialogue what the Tunisians and Egyptians won through revolution.” In late July NDI fielded a small delegation that met with officials, political party leaders, and civil society representatives to assess the pre-electoral environment. In discussion with the delegation, all parties agreed the dialogue would take place, but few could describe how the process might work and address the electoral code, political role of the army, media access, national unity, and the array of other issues on the table.

Distracted by the dialogue, parties are not making visible efforts to campaign or articulate platforms on any of the economic concerns – inflation, soaring food prices, and unemployment – that citizens face in their everyday lives. During a roundtable NDI held with Mauritanian media, one journalist commented that “the citizens are the victims of this debate.”

## Negotiations for Dialogue

One month after submitting its initial roadmap for dialogue, the COD formally presented the president with a slightly amended platform. While the content was largely the same, the revised roadmap offered some minor concessions to the president by removing references to international mediation and toning down language related to the 2009 Dakar Accords. Although the president has repeatedly refused to discuss the country’s politicized army, the revised COD platform kept the issue on the table.

The Dakar Accords pose an interesting quandary for current political actors. Some opposition representatives, such as the Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD) insist that any dialogue must be held within the context of the 2009 agreement that ended the stalemate preceding the 2009 presidential elections. The president, however, claims that the Dakar Accords pertained only to the 2009 elections and are no longer applicable. Opposition groups argue that the government is in violation of the Accords and that it would be difficult to have confidence in a new agreement, when it is clear that the

### 2009 Dakar Accords

Following the August 2008 *coup d'etat* in which General Aziz overthrew democratically elected President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, Mauritanian politicians convened in Dakar, Senegal to negotiate an end to the political impasse. The Accords set the stage for elections by creating a bipartisan CENI and reforming the electoral code. The agreement also created a mechanism for dialogue between the opposition and the president. Since June 2010, the COD has criticized the president for failing to use this mechanism.

president has little regard for the previous one. As a potential concession to the president, the revised roadmap now refers to the Dakar Accords as “the agreement initiated in Dakar and signed in Nouakchott.”

President Aziz met with Boulkheir and COD president Mahfoudh Ould Bettah on July 27 to receive the amended COD platform. Frustrated by the lack of changes in the document, the president reportedly criticized Boulkheir and Bettah for submitting essentially the same platform. The following day, the government announced the new date for elections.

## Election Administration

The electoral timetable is complicated by the fact that the senatorial elections (indirect contests for one third of the legislature’s upper house) that were postponed from April are now slated to be held in two rounds on September 25 and October 2.

The July 28 decree, which added legislative and municipal elections on October 16 and 30, respectively, gives the interior ministry a little over two months to organize four rounds of elections. While the ministry has been making efforts to update the 2009 electoral lists, there is no publicly available information on other preparations, including the designation of polling stations and recruitment and training of polling station personnel.

Moreover, the legal framework for the elections is unclear, although some parties speculate that the 2009 electoral code – which mandates a closed list mixed system of single and multiple member districts - will be used. Many parties were hoping to use the dialogue to reform aspects of the code relating to proportionality, women’s representation, and independent candidates.

The lack of information is troubling, as it is impossible for political parties to make the necessary preparations for transparent candidate nominations when they have no information on the “rules of the game” for candidate registration and campaign regulations. Similarly, there has been no communication from the interior ministry regarding whether citizen groups will be allowed to monitor the polls and, if so, what the process of accreditation will be.

## Civil Society

Citizen’s groups demonstrated throughout July in opposition to the census, which has been underway since June and is broadly considered a flawed and discriminatory process. African Mauritanians report racist behavior, including being commanded to speak Hassaniya (the dialect of Arabic spoken in Mauritania) to prove that they are Mauritanian. In late July, the “don’t touch my citizenship” campaign, organized by a group of young African Mauritanian activists, held a number of demonstrations and sit-ins outside census offices in Nouakchott and the southern city of Boghé. In Boghé, hundreds of people wearing green and yellow, Mauritania’s national colors, marched under slogans of “no to the division of the country” and “stop the census.”



*Demonstration against the census (Calame)*

In response to citizen complaints, the interior ministry organized a television program to share information on the process and combat allegations of impropriety. In the last week of July, Ibrahima Sarr, president of the predominantly African-Mauritanian Alliance for Justice and Democracy/Movement for Renewal (AJD/MR) party made public recommendations to improve the process, including stronger recruitment protocols for census workers and public information campaigns in all of Mauritania’s main languages.

Citizens are increasingly frustrated with the political back and forth among parties and the failure of the discussions over dialogue to meet pressing concerns. The February 25 movement – a loosely organized group of young Mauritanians –

announced their intent to continue their protests into August. Another youth movement, *Sumud* (“resistance,” in Arabic), also released a statement claiming to be indifferent to the dialogue, since they had no faith in its negotiators or outcomes. The *Sumud* statement also criticized the political actors for bargaining over power and ignoring the needs of the people.

Against this backdrop of unrest and dissatisfaction, the government announced plans to hold a cultural festival for national unity, entitled “Together for a United Mauritania.” The government statement announcing the event at the end of July claimed the festival would promote reconciliation.

### **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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