Mauritania Elections Bulletin

Issue No. 1: June 30 to July 6, 2009

Political Background

After weeks of political gridlock and negotiation, a final power-sharing accord was reached in Dakar, Senegal on June 27. Representatives of Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, a former general who led the 2008 *coup* and has since resigned from his post as head of the military junta to run in the presidential election, reached the agreement with opposition parties representing the National Front for the Defense of Democracy (FNDD) and Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD). In accordance with the settlement, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, the democratically-elected president who had been deposed in the *coup*, officially resigned as head of state and ceded authority in the interim to a national unity government. A key component of the agreement was the scheduling of presidential elections for July 18, with a second round if necessary on August 1. Unlike the June 6 elections scheduled by Aziz which were likely to result in the general's election as president, the current contest will feature participation from prominent opposition figures, as well as additional former members of the military. One of the most notable candidates is former Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, who led a *coup d'état* in 2005 that overthrew the long-standing regime of Maaouya Ould Sidi Ahmed Taya and steered the country's transition toward the 2007 democratic elections.

Presidential Candidates: An Overview

Name	Party	Key Fact
Supporters of August 6, 2008 *coup d'état*		
Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz	UPR	Former general, led August 2008 *coup d'état*
Ibrahima Moctar Sarr	AJD/MR PMUC /	Former presidential candidate
Saleh Ould Henena	HATEM	Member of parliament; led failed 2003 *coup*
Opponents of the August 6, 2008 *coup d'état*		
Ahmed Ould Daddah	RFD	Long-time opposition leader and former candidate
Massaoud Ould Boulkheir	APP / FNDD	Speaker of the National Assembly, anti-slavery activist
Jemil Ould Mansour	RNRD (Tawassoul)	Leader of formerly illegal Islamist party
Other candidates		
Ely Ould Mohamed Vall	No party	Former colonel, led 2005 *coup d'état*
Kane Hamidou Baba	No party	Former RFD leader, recently split with Daddah
Hamada Ould Meimou	No party	Member of parliament, defected from Aziz camp

Note: a tenth candidate, Sagair Ould M'Bareck, withdrew from the race

Election Administration

Given the strikingly short amount of time between the June 27 Dakar agreement and the July 18 election, authorities rushed to initiate preparations for the vote. After reviewing proposed candidacies between June 28 and 30, the Constitutional Council released a provisional list of 10 candidates (see inset). On June 28, the Constitutional Council officially fixed the election for July 18, following a decree issued by the government to convene the electoral college on that same day. The opposition filed a protest with the Constitutional Council claiming that the decree was neither approved by the cabinet nor signed by the interim president, Ba Mamadou Mbare, or the interior minister.

Midnight on July 2 marked the end to an exceptional four-day period to revise voter lists. Such a process was necessary due to the fact that many opposition supporters had not registered for the aborted June 6 poll as they had planned to boycott the election that the opposition alleged was unilaterally organized by Aziz. These voters were therefore granted a four-day window to register to vote.

A 15-member National Independent Election Commission (CENI) was named on July 2 and the body held its first plenary meeting two days later. The Commission, whose membership is divided evenly among Aziz's supporters, RFD members and FNDD members, is tasked with managing the election and ensuring transparent and legal conduct. During the July 4 meeting, CENI members set in place strategies for training and dispatching elections officials among the country's regions and decentralized structures. Interim Prime Minister Moulaye Ould Mohamed Laghaf also met with the 13 regional *walis*, or governors, to discuss preparations for the election. Two days later, the CENI met with the International Contact Group for Mauritania, a body comprised of representatives of the African Union, Arab League, United Nations, International Agency of La Francophonie (AIF) and the government of Senegal which was actively involved in the Dakar negotiations. The group pledged its support for the current electoral process. Finally, the AIF announced that in the coming days, it will dispatch a mission to observe the presidential elections to be led by former Burundian President Pierre Buyoya.

Campaigns

Campaigning for the presidential election began on July 2, as prominent candidates launched their campaigns in Nouakchott, the capital, and then led visits into the country's interior. The beginning of the campaign period was marked by massive campaign expenditures and heightened political discourse as Aziz's campaign and the opposition engaged in rhetorical attacks and held massive rallies to attract support. Aziz, who pledges to bring "constructive change," targeted his campaign slogans to accuse his opponents of a variety of criminal behaviors and threatened to have candidates arrested and indicted on charges. He promised to release information that would implicate opposition leaders and presidential candidates Ahmed Ould Daddah, leader of the RFD, and Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, speaker of the National Assembly, leader of the People's Progressive Alliance (APP) and of the FNDD following the 2008 *coup,* of embezzlement. In response to these allegations, Daddah and Boulkheir countered that Aziz poses a significant threat to democracy in Mauritania and therefore needs to be prevented from attaining the presidency. Both Daddah and Boulkheir had opposed Aziz's push to hold elections on June 6 and vowed to boycott the contest. Aziz also alleged that Vall, a fellow retired member of the military, had been involved in drug trafficking; Vall's strategy, however, has largely been to remove himself from the political fray of mutual accusations and shifting allegiances.

Preliminary polling results
(Courtesy of Le Renovateur'*s daily survey conducted on July 6)*

Name	% support
Ahmed Ould Daddah	20%
Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz	20%
Massaoud Ould Boulkheir	17%
Ely Ould Mohamed Vall	12%
Ibrahima Moctar Sarr	8%
Jemil Ould Mansour	7%
Saleh Ould Hanena	6%
Hamada Ould Meimou	5%
Kane Hamidou Baba	3%
Undecided	2%

Political Alliances

As the campaign period began, a marked shift of power seemed to be taking place among the front runners. Within the span of one week, 10 parliamentarians and three political parties that had supported Aziz threw their weight behind Daddah. Sawab, the third party to announce its shift to support Daddah, cited as its motivations a

lack of consultation from Aziz and newfound guarantees for holding transparent elections in accordance with the Dakar agreement. Many observers view the 2009 election as a last-ditch effort for Daddah, who has repeatedly run for president without success, including in 2007 when he faced Abdallahi in the second round. Daddah and Boulkheir, both traditional opposition leaders dating back to Taya's regime, signed an agreement to support whomever of them passes to the second round and to establish a coalition following the election. At the same time, one candidate from the aborted June 6 elections who had prepared a candidacy for the current contest, Sagair Ould M'Bareck, a prime minister under Taya, opted to terminate his candidacy in order to support Aziz's campaign. Analysts speculated that M'Bareck, who had lobbied for but failed to receive a reimbursement of his expenditures from the June 6 campaign, was struggling to continue funding his campaign. Along with candidates Kane Hamidou Baba and Ibrahima Moctar Sarr, M'Bareck refused to open his campaign on July 2, demanding a reimbursement for prior campaign costs. In the meantime, numerous former prime ministers and members of past governments continued to pledge their support among the leading candidates.

Another notable characteristic of the campaign was the involvement of influential businessmen who voiced support for candidates; certain commentators even went so far as to describe the election as a war among businessmen. The two largest business groups in Mauritania have split to support Daddah and Aziz and have each devoted ample support to both camps. Other less prominent businessmen have thrown their weight behind Boulkheir. Tribal alliances have traditionally exerted tremendous influence on Mauritanian politics and elections. While campaigning, Aziz declared that two tribes have positioned themselves against him. Although these alliances may be strongly influencing the Mauritanian election behind the scenes, the candidates have largely avoided displaying their tribal allegiances in public.

Courtesy of Middle East Online

Sources: *Nouakchott Info, le Calame, Quotidien de Nouakchott, l'EveilHebdo, l'Authentique, Agence France Presse, Taqadoumy, Afrique en ligne, Walfadjri*