



Mauritania Elections Bulletin



Issue No. 3: July 14 to July 24, 2009

Summary

On the evening of July 19, the Mauritanian Interior Ministry released the final results of the first round of the presidential election. According to the Ministry, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, the former general who led a *coup d'état* to come to power in August 2008, carried 52.58 percent of the vote, eliminating the need for a second round run-off. Behind Aziz in the results were opposition leaders Massaoud Ould Boulkheir with 16.29 percent and Ahmed Ould Daddah with 13.66 percent, well below predictions based on polls. Official figures recorded that more than 800,000 Mauritians participated in the contest, or 61.46 percent of registered voters. In his announcement of the results, Interior Minister Mohamed Ould Rzeizim declared that voting took place under good conditions. On July 23, the Constitutional Council officially validated the Ministry election results.

Even before polling stations had closed on election day, however, opposition candidates began to allege that fraudulent actions were committed during the electoral process. The morning of the following day, the four most prominent opposition candidates held a joint press conference denouncing the election as a “masquerade” intended to legitimize the 2008 *coup* and calling on the international community to launch an investigation. Three days following the election, three candidates, Massaoud Ould Boulkheir, Ahmed Ould Daddah and Ely Ould Mohamed Vall formally submitted claims of widespread fraud to the Constitutional Council. These claims were rejected by the council in its July 23 decision, which cannot be appealed. In another noteworthy development, Sid’Ahmed Ould Dey, leader of the National Independent Election Commission (CENI), resigned the same day as a “matter of conscience,” expressing his “doubt over the reliability” of the elections based on the nature of complaints received by the CENI and the fraud allegations submitted by the three candidates.



Mauritians line up to vote in Nouakchott (anbaa.info)

While opposition party critics made serious and significant allegations of widespread fraud and irregularities, election authorities represented by the CENI and some international diplomatic delegations claimed that, apart from a handful of incidents, the elections were fair and transparent. Three hundred and twenty delegates from the Arab League, African Union (AU), Organization of La Francophonie (OIF) and the Organization of the Islamic Congress (OIC) observed the process, and in an official statement released on July 20 praised the administration and conduct of the elections, citing some irregularities but asserting that these occurrences would not have affected the overall outcome. Such statements from international delegations are highly questionable, especially as a second round was only avoided by the difference of a few percentage points. Other organizations, including the European Union (EU) and NGOs experienced in election observation, did not send observers, citing the lack of necessary conditions for proper observation; no domestic monitors were able to deploy to oversee the vote. Considering the overall process, many analysts have noted that even if election day was well administered, organizing an election only three weeks after an agreement disbanding the ruling military junta severely undermines the possibility of holding a democratic election. Despite the Council’s decision, the opposition’s commitment to rallying citizens to reject the election results and protest the Council’s ruling ensures that the debate about the legitimacy of the election will continue.



Woman voting in Nouakchott (VOA)

Following the election, Aziz praised international delegations for their work and rejected any accusations of fraud, leaving the issue, he said, to the Interior Ministry and elections authorities. In the same statement he called on opposition leaders to submit tangible proof to substantiate their allegations. He proclaimed himself to be “president of all Mauritians” and vowed that the elections would lead to the establishment of a state founded on law and democratic institutions. Four of the less prominent candidates congratulated Aziz for his victory and declared that the elections were transparent and that irregularities would not have affected the final result. On July 19, Moroccan King Mohammed VI was the first head of state to officially recognize Aziz’s victory.

One noteworthy incident surrounding the July 18 polls was a late-night shootout in Nouakchott on the eve of the election. According to the chief of state security, the two men who clashed with security services are members of the terrorist cell with ties to al-Qaeda and are suspected to be behind the murder of an American in Nouakchott last month. One man was killed and another wounded; the latter was reported to be wearing a belt of explosives. Daddah denounced this occurrence as an attempt to sway the vote in favor of Aziz, and demanded an investigation.

Contestation

After initially denouncing the elections on July 19, three candidates, Boulkheir, Daddah and Vall, assembled evidence of fraud collected during the campaign and on election day. The candidates first plead their case before the CENI, which was unable to take any action under Mauritanian law since results had already been released by the interior ministry. The candidates therefore prepared a dossier of evidence for the Constitutional Council, the sole body with the legal authority to address disputed elections, which is comprised of three members appointed by the president, two by the president of the National Assembly and one by the president of the Senate. According to Mohamed Ould Mouloud, spokesman for the National Front for the Defense of Democracy (FNDD), the candidates created a working commission to gather “tangible evidence of the massive fraud,” including proof of manipulation of the electoral list, improper conduct by polling station officials, duplication and falsification of voter cards and ballots, fraud in foreign polling stations and the use of chemical products on the ballot that would transfer votes to Aziz. Various websites began to host citizen videos documenting biased conduct by polling station workers and the falsification of voter identification cards.



Three candidates contesting the election: Boulkheir, Vall and Daddah (AFP)

Prior to a deadline on July 21, Daddah, Boulkheir and Vall formally submitted their claims of fraud to the Constitutional Council, demanding investigations of their allegations with the assistance of international experts, as well as a recount of the vote. In its final decision on July 23, however, the Council, which had also endorsed the August 6, 2008 *coup d'état* led by Aziz, validated the election results and rejected claims of fraud. The Council justified its decision on the grounds that observers representing each candidate signed and approved the vote-total forms submitted by each polling station. Such reasoning is problematic given the opposition’s concerns over the lack of oversight mechanisms to verify that results forms, or *procès verbaux*, sent from polling stations matched those received at the national level (see below).

In a separate press conference, Boulkheir, Daddah and Vall also issued a statement to oppose the conclusions drawn by international delegations. The candidates made three broad criticisms of these delegations: (1) the number of delegates was insufficient to meet the needs expressed by different parties, and only allowed for sending delegates to Nouakchott and on short visits to several large cities; (2) delegates were not present to oversee electoral preparations, including the drafting of electoral lists, creation of the ballot, appointment of the CENI, etc., and; (3) the delegates lacked sufficient awareness of the Mauritanian political environment and local customs; they were therefore limited to issuing a superficial and subjective assessment.

The Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD), a political party led by Daddah, launched a campaign called “Where did my vote go?” which aims to “reestablish the truth on the July 18 election, marred by massive fraud” and particularly focuses on Nouakchott voters. The party’s head of communication called on all voters living in the capital who voted for Daddah to contact the campaign. Daddah only received 15.8 percent of the vote in the city compared with 45.16 percent for Aziz. On the evening of July 20, Daddah supporters protesting the election results and riot police clashed in Nouakchott, with police firing teargas at protesters who in return threw stones.

The degree of support for the opposition is largely dependent on their ability to mobilize citizens, many of whom now advocate appeasement with the hopes of moving past political turmoil. Some citizens who supported the opposition now comment that the future is more important, and that the contesting candidates should accept the result. An editorial in *l'Authentique* referred to the “retirement” of the current opposition and the emergence of a new political class.

Before the vote

Prior to the election, representatives of the CENI reported to the Agence Mauritanienne d’Information (AMI) that all arrangements were in place to organize the July 18 vote under good conditions. A spokesman claimed the CENI would follow the entire electoral process through 97 commissions situated in the capitals of the *wilayas* (regions) and *moughataas* (districts), and that CENI representatives would be present in each of the 63 polling stations located in 19 countries around the world. The code of good conduct drafted by the CENI in collaboration with national and international experts was reportedly signed by all candidates.

The leading candidates ceased their campaign efforts by midnight on July 16 after holding rallies in different neighborhoods of Nouakchott. According to observers, the largest rallies were held by Daddah and Boulkheir. During his last rally, held in Arafat, Aziz congratulated his supporters, who he described as the “majority,” as well as those who planned to vote for other candidates. Daddah said that once elected, he would focus on the needs of all Mauritians and not only on his supporters. Boulkheir declared that he would “accept the election results, even if favorable to another candidate, on the condition that voting operations take place in total transparency.” He warned against fraud specifying that he would not accept rigged results, whether or not they are accepted by the international community. Islamist candidate Jemil Ould Mansour spoke of the establishment of a reformist movement with a reputation for integrity, bringing new hope for Mauritania’s political future.



Daddah's final campaign rally in Nouakchott
(Mauritanie-Web)

Election day

Beginning at 7 a.m. on Saturday, July 18, more than 800,000 Mauritians voted to elect a new president of the republic in 2,451 polling stations across the country and 63 locations overseas. Long lines formed in front of Nouakchott’s polling stations, yet the overall participation rate was lower than in 2007. Due to the exceptionally short time frame to prepare for the election, many citizens did not have a chance to transfer their voter registration to the location where they planned to travel for vacation within the country.

In a visit to several polling stations on the afternoon of election day, CENI president Deye asserted that electoral operations were initiated around the country under good conditions. He stated that no problems had been recorded at that time and that polling station employees did not refer to any administrative or logistical issues. Less than a week following the election, however, Deye resigned from his post, rescinding his

endorsement of the election based on the content of complaints received by the CENI and opposition leaders' allegations.

At the same time, around 320 international delegates representing the Arab League, AU and OIF were dispatched to oversee the process. It is important to note, however, that given the political influence and restraints placed on member-state organizations conducting electoral observation, as well as the very limited timeframe and scope in which such observation took place, the accuracy of delegates' reports are subject to debate. Other international organizations like the EU and NGOs experienced in election observation did not send observers, citing the lack of necessary conditions for proper observation.



Aziz voting (courtesy *Agence France Presse*)

After voting, candidates issued statements when leaving the polling station. Aziz reiterated his confidence that he would win in the first round, vowing that his victory would bring “change towards a more prosperous Mauritania.” Like Aziz, Daddah also predicted a first round win and pledged that attempts at manipulating the vote would not be successful or tolerated. Boulkheir expressed his hope that the election would lead to “democracy, unity and solidarity” for Mauritania with no further intervention in politics by the military and other exceptional actors. For his part, Vall voiced his concern over potential fraud and reported that his campaign was actively examining the accuracy of allegations of the

falsification of results. Countering these predictions, Mansour called on the frontrunners to exhibit restraint and wait for the results, while the remaining four candidates issued statements anticipating that the election would bring an end to the political crisis weighing on the country.

As the day drew to a close, however, initial press reports and statements from the opposition's campaigns alleged a variety of questionable activity surrounding the electoral process. During a four-day period in early July, authorities allowed citizens, including many opposition supporters who were boycotting the aborted June 6 election, to register to vote for the July 18 election. One significant allegation made by Boulkheir's campaign at noon on election day was that 80 percent of the voters added to the electoral list during this exceptional review period did not appear on the final list. The significance behind Boulkheir's claim, therefore, is that a large proportion of opposition supporters were disenfranchised.



Voting in the July 18 election (Magharebia)

Opposition candidates' primary concern before election day was the lack of a mechanism to verify that the *procès verbaux*, or polling station records, sent from each polling station matched the same reports received by higher administrative bodies. Some candidates demanded that carbon copies be made to ensure consistency by preventing attempts to prefabricate results with falsified *procès verbaux*. Reports on opposition websites such as Mauritania-Web.com of *procès verbaux* being written in advance, particularly in the southeast region of Hodh El Charghi, mirrored opposition fears about the oversight of the transmission of these reports.

Government-issued results

Regional election commissions began to gather results from local polling stations as early as 8 p.m., one hour following the closing of the polls. By 2 a.m. on Sunday, July 19, the media began to release provisional results which revealed a large lead and absolute majority for Aziz. In response to these figures and based on information gathered during election day, four candidates held a press conference early on the morning of July 19 to reject what they described as an “electoral farce” and to demand an international investigation into widespread fraud in the electoral process. In a joint press conference, Boulkheir, Daddah, Vall and Hamada Ould Meimou issued a statement denouncing the election as a “masquerade” to legitimize the 2008 *coup* and

calling on the international community to investigate fraud allegations. Among the fraud attempts cited by the candidates were prefabricated results, vote buying, incomplete and inaccurate voter lists, partial conduct by polling station officials, repeated voting, falsification of voter cards and the expulsion of candidates' representatives from polling stations. The four candidates urged Mauritians to mobilize for the “failure of an electoral *coup d'état*.”

On the evening of July 19, the Mauritanian Interior Ministry released formal results which placed Aziz well ahead of his challengers with 52.58 percent of the vote. Opposition leaders Boulkheir and Daddah followed with 16.29 percent and 13.66 percent, respectively. Voter turnout was listed at 61.46 percent, about ten points lower than the first round of the 2007 presidential election. While Aziz had often asserted his confidence that he would win the election in the first round, many commentators had predicted that a second round was likely due to the large number of candidates (nine) and the apparently high degree of support for top candidates who had run in past elections.

Behind Aziz in the results were opposition leaders Massaoud Boulkheir and Daddah, who performed well below many poll predictions, including one of the most reliable polls in Mauritania—a confidential survey conducted by the National Gendarmerie in the days prior to the election—which predicted that Daddah would win in at least five of 12 regions. The final results included significant victories by substantial margins for Aziz in areas that typically support the opposition: Trarza, Nouadhibou, Nouakchott, Zoueiratt and Kiffa.

Election results

As reported July 19 by the Interior Ministry

Name	% of vote
Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz	52.58%
Massaoud Ould Boulkheir	16.29%
Ahmed Ould Daddah	13.66%
Jemil Ould Mansour	4.76%
Ibrahima Moctar Sarr	4.59%
Ely Ould Mohamed Vall	3.81%
Kane Hamidou Baba	1.49%
Saleh Ould Hanena	1.31%
Hamada Ould Meimou	1.28%
Sghair Ould M'Bareck*	0.23%

*Withdrew candidacy
Voter turnout rate: 61.46 percent or 817,260 voters

Shortly following the release of the results, Aziz praised international delegations for their work and rejected any accusations of fraud, leaving the issue, he said, to the Interior Ministry and elections authorities. In the same statement he called on opposition leaders to submit tangible proof to substantiate their allegations. He went on to declare himself the “president of all Mauritians.” Four of the less prominent candidates—Ibrahima Moctar Sarr, Jemil Ould Mansour, Kane Hamidou Baba and Saleh Ould Hanena—congratulated Aziz for his victory in a transparent electoral process, acknowledging some irregularities but dismissing their importance. Such rhetoric from Mansour, leader of the Islamist *Tawassoul* party, is particularly significant, as it represents a shift in stance away from his alliance with the FNDD and RFD, formed in opposition to the 2008 *coup d'état*. Mansour was one of the first candidates to denounce the elections, even before the closing of voting, however the party rescinded its critique in the following days.



Aziz supporters celebrate (Le Monde)

A number of “majority” political parties congratulated Aziz as well, including the Democratic Renewal (RD), Republican Party for Democracy and Renewal (PRDR), Union for Democracy and Progress (UDP) and Union for the Republic (UPR), Aziz’s party. Apart from these candidates and parties, some commentators and onlookers expressed their support for the results and an eagerness to move forward. These comments were largely based around the idea that the election lays the groundwork for democracy in Mauritania and provides a path to emerge from months of political crisis and gridlock.

Early statements from individual members of the Arab League, AU, OIF and OIC delegations referred to a “certain number of inefficiencies” but tended to be by and large positive, praising the transparent conduct and successful administration of the election. Michel Sapin, a French parliamentarian and member of the OIF mission, remarked that most of the opposition’s complaints concerned the campaign period and not the election itself; he reportedly did not observe any “flagrant irregularity” on election day. On July 20, these representatives issued a joint official statement lauding the elections and referring to the “good functioning of polling sites, correct monitoring procedures and transparency and rigor of vote-counting.” Aware of the allegations of fraud and the opposition’s rejection of the results, the statement called on opponents to rely on legal channels to express their criticisms of the election. Comments from other international actors on the ground in Nouakchott, including Violette Daguerre, Chairwoman of the Arab Committee on Human Rights, strongly supported the opposition’s accusations of fraud and called into question the objectivity of the Arab League, AU, OIF and OIC delegation. Speaking in an interview with Al Jazeera, she expressed her belief that the process was “altered” and reported being witness to a number of violations, including repeat voting, partial treatment of voters by polling station officials and errors on the electoral lists.

Later on the evening of July 19, Moroccan King Mohammed VI became the first head of state to officially recognize Aziz’s victory. As events unfolded the following day, the French foreign ministry voiced its support for the outcome, stating that there were no “major anomalies” in the process according to delegates’ reports, and calling on all Mauritians to take part in a constructive dialogue. Other foreign governments soon followed suit. Prior to the Constitutional Council’s decision, however, the European Union stated that fraud allegations should be “thoroughly probed.” As of publication, the United States had not issued a decision. In a communiqué, the French Socialist Party stated that the short time frame “did not allow for a true consensus among political actors on the administration and conduct of the election.” International statements over the coming days will shed light on countries’ positions on the legitimacy of the election.



Women hold their ID cards while waiting to vote (AP)

Sources: *Quotidien de Nouakchott*, *Biladi, l'Authentique*, *Taqadoumy*, *Agence Mauritanienne d'Info*, *Agence Nouakchott d'Info*, *BBC News*, *Journaltahalil.com*, *Mauritanie-Web.com*, *NouvelObs*, *For-Mauritania.org*, *Maghreb24*, *Agence France Presse*, *Reuters*, *Voice of America*

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.

Authors

Bâ Amadou, NDI-Mauritania

Nicholas Collins, NDI-Washington, D.C.

Contact

If you have any questions or comments about the information contained in this bulletin, please contact Nicholas Collins at ncollins@ndi.org.