The Legacy of Mauritania's Colonels:

West Africa's Next Crisis?

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ISBN:978-978-952-166-1

ABSTRACT:

Five colonels have ruled Mauritania almost uninterruptedly since the inaugural 1978 coup d'état. Mostly unremarkable officers, their shared (Arab-Berber) social origins, varied personalities, military careers, and styles of leadership have had a deep impact on the evolution of their ethnically divided country. Briefly taking stock of the pertinent theoretical literature on democratic transitions, civil-military relations, identity conflict, and the merit of focusing on the role of individual leaders, this study comparatively examines and evaluates their legacy on two of Mauritania's enduring challenges: The country's recurring ethno-cultural tensions labeled "the national question" symbolized by an unsettled "human rights deficit," and the sempiternally deferred military withdrawal from politics and genuine democratization, each colonel promised, but none actually delivered on. It is argued that the colonels' failure to meet these pressing challenges, due in part to their shared obsession to uphold a system of sociocultural domination and new challenges such as terrorism and the extreme politicization of Islam, expose Mauritania and West Africa to the risk of yet another violent crisis.

INTRODUCTION

After the June 21, 2014 election, which was boycotted by all major political parties, but resulted in the reelection of General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz with 82% of voters,[1] Mauritania may have entered a phase of its evolution with heightened risk of instability and violence. This election may have been another evidence of the sociopolitical crisis in which this country has been mired, and the risks this entails for its West African neighborhood. This study comparatively investigates the reign of the colonels who, as heads of state, ruled Mauritania since 1978 to explain why a severe crisis could result from the daunting challenges this fragile state now faces. It studies their personae, policies and the impact they had on their country. The study's main contention is that, after thirty years of military rule, Mauritania's Colonels failed to address their country's two critical challenges—resolving the 'national question' and truly democratizing the political system by withdrawing the military from politics-- to potentially destructive consequences for its own stability and that of the West African sub-region.

Despite strenuous attempts to reorient the country toward the Maghreb (itself a region troubled enough) and the Arab world, Mauritania belongs to West Africa, one of the most crisis ridden regions in Africa. It is argued that this failure is due in part to the fact that Mauritania's Colonels are caught up in an elaborate hegemonic system of domination by the Arab-Berber minority –to which all belong--determined to maintain the status quo by all means, including by (mis)using Islam, the religion of all Mauritanians, and obsessively transform Mauritania into an Arab country. An ideology that could be labeled 'Arabo-Islamism' seems to have undergirded the policies of all Mauritania's colonels. Given the realities of the Sahel/Saharan context, his could contribute to fueling conflict.

[1] ***Hademine Ould Sadi*** **"Mauritania's leader who took on Al-Qaeda"** ***available at*** http://www.africareview.cm/News/The-strongman-who-took-on-Al-Qaeda/-/979180/2358560/-/xnwhs4/-/index.html (accessed 7/10 2015)

This case study of Mauritania offers an analysis that can contribute to the literature on the dynamics and consequences of the challenges many African states still face to achieve a genuine democratization even as they confront frustrating ethnic, cultural or religious conundrums. This study is also a contribution to a better understanding of the critical impact of the sociological background and related psychological makeup and itineraries of individual leaders on the political evolution of their countries, recent arguments emphasizing the role of institutions notwithstanding. Finally, this study seeks also to add to our understanding of the dynamics of conflict, certainly some of its political causes in the Sahel, a sub-region already severely destabilized by violent crises.

This study is divided in four sections. The first provides a brief historical and sociopolitical background of Mauritania, while the next segment briefly reviews a sample of the literature that relates to its relevant concepts, and justifies the theoretical and methodological approach used for the study. The third section presents the personal, sociological backgrounds, and attributes of the Colonels. It provides relevant information on their evolution as men and officers, and on the factors, influences, and dynamics that contributed to making them who they are. Their personality, styles, modus operandi, as well as the turning points and critical events in their evolution are comparatively analyzed, in how they may have influenced their policy decisions. The fourth segment compares and contrasts the Colonels' respective approaches to, management of, and impact on, the two most critical challenges Mauritania has faced throughout its existence as an independent nation, and singularly since the Colonels have been in charge of its destiny. This section is followed by concluding observations.

Brief Sociopolitical Background

Mauritania's estimated 3.5 million people (in 2014) are made up of three major ethno-cultural groups. The 'Negro-Mauritanians' (black African *Halpulaar*, *Soninke*, *Wolof,* and *Bambara*), Arab-Berber Maurs and the *Haratine*, descendant of slaves. The *Abeed* (still enslaved black

Mauritanians) are counted as *Haratine*. The two former groups make up about 30% of the population each, and the Haratines roughly 40%.[2] The Maurs (also *Bith'an*, *Beydane* or 'White' Maurs) are the light-skinned descendants of indigenous Berbers and the Arab tribes (Beni-Hassan) that came in the 8th century from the Arab Peninsula. Highly hierarchical and 'tribalized,' the Maurs have dominated all walks of life since independence. Mauritania's recent political history has been marked by cyclical challenges to Maur hegemony and forceful attempts by 'Negro-Mauritanians' and *Haratines* to assert their (non-Arab) cultural identity and demand a more equitable share of political and economic power.

Mokhtar Ould Daddah, the first civilian president, pursued international relations and policies aimed at entrenching the traditional role of Mauritania as the "*trait d'union"* (hyphen) (and bridge) between Sub-Saharan Africa and Arab oriented North Africa. In the mid-1970, he made the fatal blunder of playing a supporting role in Morocco's expansionist policies toward Spanish Western Sahara which led to war against the Polisario Front, the guerilla movement fighting for the independence of the territory.

Weary of a war it was poorly fighting (and badly losing), the army took power in a bloodless coup on July 10, 1978, and withdrew (quite laboriously) from the disastrous territorial conflict. Soon thereafter, dissension and personal ambitions within the military junta led to the series of coups and countercoups that made Mauritania what it is today.

Since July 10, 1978, Mauritania has been ruled by no less than five military heads of state (and Juntas), each rising to power through a –bloodless—coup d'état. There were, of course, many failed (and bloody) attempts as well as numerous plots,[3] making Mauritania a praetorian state by any definition. Freshly promoted (General),[4] Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz led the latest coup on August 6, 2008. This one easily overthrew arguably the only ever democratically elected president, the civilian Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. On August 3, 2005, then Colonel Ould Abdel Aziz had also led the coup that overthrew Colonel Maaouiya Ould Sid'Ahmed

[2] CIA, "Mauritania," https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mr.html (accessed July 15, 2014).
[3] The most notorious bloody coup attempts were the March 16 1991 and June 6, 2003. The most publicized plots happen in 1986 and 2004.
[4] There is a consensus that this promotion violated established regulations, at least in spirit, since it ignored seniority and merit, and that it was a payback for colonel Ould Abdel Aziz's support during the presidential elections. Given this reality and to ensure a degree of

Taya. In December 1984, colonel Ould Taya had overthrown Lt-Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla, who had maneuvered to take power in June 1979, after the accidental death of Colonel Ahmed Ould Bouceif in May 1979. Colonel Bouceif had perpetrated the first 'military on military' coup that had toppled Colonel Moustapha Ould Mohamed Saleck, the author of the initial July 1978 coup. In other words, more than 50 years of independence, except for the first 17 years and a period of 17 months of democratic interlude between 2007 and 2008, Mauritania was ruled by military officers whose preferred mode of access to power was to carry out a military coup.

Literature Review and Brief Conceptual and Methodological Considerations[5]

Since the democratic opening of the early 1990s in Africa and the nearly simultaneous start of the unending crises that have engulfed the west Africa/Sahel region, a copious literature has developed on the challenges of the democratization process (on the continent more specifically), on the one hand, and on the causes and consequences of conflict in Africa in general and singularly in its Northwest troubled sub-region, on the other hand. Relatedly, theoreticians as well as practitioners of the democratization process then (and still) unfolding on the continent had, amid numerous challenges facing Africans in dismantling old authoritarian systems, emphasized the dual challenges inherent in getting the military definitely out of politics and, at the same time, managing sensibly ethnic divisions. Other studies that relate to the major concepts and methodology of this study have also to do with the pertinence of a focus on the characteristics of individual political actors in the scientific study of political phenomena. This brief review will concern itself with only a small fraction of aspects of these literatures.

In the widely referenced book he edited, *The State, Conflict, and Democracy in Africa*, Richard Joseph recognizes, citing Marina Ottaway and Jeffrey Herbst, that democratization processes in Africa do "heighten ethnic considerations and provoke defensive postures by political dominant groups."[6] In the same vein, in a particularly insightful essay on the record of the democratization efforts by the end of the century in the same book, Crawford Young also concludes that "[t]he saliency of cultural diversity in most African states, however, poses clear challenges to sustainable democracy," though sensible approaches to this issue in the democratization process should be able to find solutions that would accommodate "ethnic, religious, or racial differences."[7] Still addressing the worries facing crafters of democracies in culturally plural polities, but with reference to Western Europe, Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan also called

consistency, I continue to refer to Ould Abel Aziz as colonel, his rank before the controversial promotion.

[5] The author wishes to gratefully thank anonymous review(s) whose insightful comments served to improve markedly this segment.

[6] Richard Joseph, "State Conflict and Democracy in Africa," in Richard Joseph (ed.) *State Conflict and Democracy in Africa*, Boulder, Colo., Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999, 3-14, p. 8.

[7] Crawford Young, "The Third Wave of Democratization in Africa: Ambiguities and Contradictions," in Richard Joseph, (ed.), *State*

attention to the singular challenges facing "multinational states" attempting to consolidate democracy. They noted that, if genuine democratization is the aim, leaders must pay attention to "the particular mix of nations, cultures, and awakened identities" in their country.[8] The difficulties inherent in the transformation of authoritarian political systems into genuine democracies do not get any easier when the objective is also to demilitarize societies long dominated by praetorians as was the case for many African states, including Mauritania.

Writing from the unique vantage point of a practitioner with keen knowledge of the West African context specifically, Kayode Fayemi, for example, observed that there is a "paradox" in the "democratization-demilitarization process" in that, "asking authoritarian governments with few or no answer to their countries' economic and social problems to demilitarize could only be seen by incumbents as political suicide. On the other hand, advising those excluded from the political process to put their faith in 'electoral democracy,' when they know everywhere the deck is stacked against them, can only engender conflict."[9] This appreciation seems to cunningly capture the essence of the connection between the failures of Mauritania's various colonels to meet the challenges they all faced and the potential for conflict their failure may generate. To be sure, fulfilling the promise of leaving power and ushering in a full-fledged democracy has always been a tricky affair for Africa military leaders, as Fayemi illustrates in his article.

Their role and performance in the process of returning a country to civilian regime is as old as the wave of coups that swept through African immediately after independence. As early as 1974, Claude E. Welch, Jr. examined what leads African juntas to want to abandon political power. Welch reviewed the quandary, indecisiveness, and self doubt they face when, for some reason, they decide to bow out of politics (in contrast to their resolve and assurance when staging coups). Quite presciently, Welch predicted that "the establishment of civilian control constitutes a task far more complex than the simple seizure of control. It is a lengthy obligation

Conflict and Democracy in Africa, Boulder, Colo., Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999, 15-38, p. 32.
[8] Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, "Towards Consolidated democracies," *Journal of Democracy*, 7 (2), 1996, p. 27.
[9] Kayode Fayemi, "The Future of Democratization and Civil-Military Relations in West Africa: Challenges and Prospects for Democratic Consolidation," *African Journal of Political Science*, 3 (1), 1998, 85.

that will tax the ingenuity of African political leaders for decades to come." Then and for the decades that followed the model of 'disengagement' was quite predictable, and with few short-lived exceptions, fit what Welch described as "personal transition,"[10] (that is a military leader doffing his uniform, holding plebiscitary elections and pretending to be democratically elected. As Abdoulaye Saine also noted, even after the retreat of authoritarianism in the 1990s, the phenomenon did not abate, and the list of "soldiers turned presidential candidate"[11] is long indeed. Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, Francois Bozize of the CAR, Yahya Jammeh of The Gambia as well as some of Mauritania's colonels are prototypes of the syndrome. Personal transitions do not always happen smoothly. And when the military leader does not quite get it 'right' sometimes they can go spectacularly awry as in Cote d'Ivoire and result in political catastrophe,[12] or in Niger with the assassination of colonel Barré Mainassara, though to a lesser extend. Beyond the institutional and societal setups in which these "personal transitions" occurred, however, the individual leader's role, influenced by his personal background, characteristics and attributes was critical in all these cases.

One of the most aberrant forms of transition has been Nigeria's never-ending transition in the 1990s, many analysts have chronicled.[13] Until the sudden death of General Abacha (and who can deny the impact of his personality?), the Nigerian military, by then an inchoate, hollow, utterly corrupt, resource-grabbing machine led by confused and greedy officers, kept promising to handover power to civilians without ever being able to let go.[14] Beyond this peculiar case, as the 1990s came to a close, it was clear that Africa as a whole was not following the path theorists of civil-military relations in Latin America such as Alfred Stepan had observed. On that sub-continent, having overstayed their welcome and rapidly losing their legitimacy and cohesiveness, and under pressure from mobilized

[10] Claude E. Welch, Jr., "The military withdrawal from politics: some considerations from tropical Africa." *African Studies Review* 17 (1) 1974, p. 225.
[11] Abdoulaye Saine, "The Soldier-Turned Presidential Candidate: A Comparison of Flawed Transitions in Ghana and Gambia. *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 28 (2), 2000, 191-209.
[12] Boubacar N'Diaye, "Not a Miracle after all...Cote D'Ivoire's Downfall: Flawed Civil-Military Relations and Missed Opportunities" *Scientia Militaria* 33 (1) 2005, 89-118.
[13] See for example, Pita Agbese & George Kieh, "Military disengagement from Africa politics: the Nigerian experience," *Afrika Spectrum* 27 (1) 1992, 5-23; Larry Diamond, A. Kirk-Green, & O. Oyediran. (Eds), *Transition without end: Nigerian Politics and Civil Society under Babangida*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1997; Julius Ihonvbere, *Constitutionalism and the African Military: Contemporary Constitutional Strategies to Domesticate the African Military*, in J. M. Mbaku & J. Ihonvbere eds. The transition to Democratic Governance in Africa: The Continuing Struggle, Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2003. 179-201.
[14] Kayode Fayemi, "Military Hegemony and the Transition Program," *Issue*: *A Journal of Opinion* 27 (1) 1999, 69-72.

democratic forces, militaries were scrambling to cut deals and hand power to truly democratically elected civilian governments (the so-called "pacted" transitions).[15]

In Africa, and certainly in Mauritania in contrast, as discussed below, the tendency of military "disengagement" from politics was not "deal" based extirpations, but mostly maneuvers to prevent real democratization, or set up a return to power through a coup as was seen repeatedly in Niger, Guinea Bissau, and indeed Mauritania.

As Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle have noted, the manner in which the typical transitions from repressive authoritarian regimes in Africa have unfolded have encouraged violence and instability, rather than foster environments of give and take and conflict avoiding compromise. Indeed "unpacted" African transitions "were rarely accompanied by bargaining or compromise," instead, "[b]orn out of polarized conflicts, new regimes were installed in a winner-take-all atmosphere" that has also tended to favor the emergence or reemergence of "big men" with considerable impact on the ensuing developments with nefarious carry overs from the authoritarian period.[16]

As demonstrated in a study of the causes of conflict in the ECOWAS region, some of the most devastating violent crises in West Africa (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, etc, can be traced to these dynamics. In that study N'Diaye argued that a number of internal deficits, individually or compounded, contribute directly to conflict in the region, these being, in addition to the flawed nature of the postcolonial state, poor political governance, mismanagement of latent identity disputes, and disregard for the basic needs of the people.[17]

More recently, James Gow and his coauthors, in a study focused on *Militancy and Violence in West Africa* and using a few case studies, found that religious and ethnic divisions and dynamics, and their mishandling by

[15] Alfred Stepan, "Paths toward re-democratization: theoretical and comparative considerations," in G. O'Donnell, Ph. C. Schmitter, & Laurence Whitehead, eds. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, 76-78.
[16] Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997, 257-259.
[17] Boubacar N'Diaye, "Conflicts and Crises in West Africa: Internal and International Dimensions," in Thomas Jaye, Dauda Garuba, and Stella Amadi (ed.), *ECOWAS and the Dynamics of Conflict and Peace-Building*, Dakar, CODESRIA, 2013, 27-44.

national elites are at the heart of radicalization and consequent violence in the cases studied.[18] In the same volume, Ernest Djixhoorn and Boubacar N'Diaye also found, with reference to other non English speaking West Africa countries not covered by the study, namely Mali, Niger, and to a lesser extent, Mauritania, that these states are not immune from the same causes of violent conflict and that, more specifically, violence "is instigated by political elites or military factions,"[19] exploiting long-standing identity related grievances and steering religious sentiments.

If we grant that the difficulties inherent in ushering in a viable democracy in a context of ethnic tensions, even when the efforts are sincere, can generated conflict, the issue of the pertinence of focusing on the role and impact of individual actors remains, given the emphasis of most political scientists on institutions and other variables to study this phenomenon.[20] For instance, in her *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*, neo-institutionalist Jennifer Gandhi has concluded her quantitative study of the role of institutions in the running and endurance of autocracies (and using forceful illustrative cases) that under non democratic regime, significant institutions such as parliaments and political parties are not "window-dressing" and instead are needed and consequential in policy developments and outcomes, and cannot be dismissed if we are to understand such regimes.[21] In the same vein, and focusing on the objective role of political parties and related institutional structures on the resilience and durability of authoritarian regimes (and using as case studies notorious authoritarian polities with Machiavelli's prince-like/prince-inspired leaders), Jason Brownlee also reaches the conclusion that the fate of such regimes does not depend on "just the unrestrained and arbitrary use of power by capricious individuals. …Organizational restraints prolog and expand power."[22] Browlee insists that longevity in politics is not to be attributed to "masterful individual

[18] James Gow and Funmi Olonisakin, "Introduction: Militancy and Violence in West Africa," in James Gow et al. (eds.), *Militancy in Violence in West Africa: Religion, Politics and Radicalization*, New York, Routledge, 2013, 1-14.
[19] Ernest Dijxhoorn and Boubacar N'Diaye, "Beyond Anglophone West Africa: Endemic Conflict and New Islamic Radicalism," in James Gow et al.(eds.), *Militancy in Violence in West Africa: Religion, Politics and Radicalization*, New York, Routledge, 216-234, p. 219.
[20] See for example, Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2, 1999, 115-144; also, among others, Kathleen Thelen and Sven Steinmo, "Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics," in K. Thelen, S. Steinmo, and F. Longstreth, (eds.), *Structuring Politics: Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Analysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 1-32.
[21] Jennifer Gandhi, *Political Institutions under Dictatorship*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 180-185.
[22] Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 202,

leaders" but requires "institutions that enable the kinds of conflict mediation and resolution" and "…organizations that transcend the capacity of any single figure…" [23]

While these are interesting findings they do not affect the thrust of this study, the objective of which is less what explains the durability of Mauritania's colonels than explain the policies they enacted (as inspired by their respective personalities) and why these may lead to severe crises in their country and likely spillover into a particularly crisis-laden sub-region.

It is, of course undeniable that, even under the most personalist military regimes as those of Mauritania's colonels were, institutions played an undeniable role, particularly as democratization became, starting in the 1990s, the dominant political fashion to which rulers had to formally sacrifice. Even then, however, as discussed below, the independent impact of the personal characteristics, idiosyncrasies, motivations, and agendas are critical in understanding political developments, particular when the preferred mode of action of these heads of state was to deliberately ignore, singularly weak 'democratic' institutions and their processes. In such contexts, as has been the case for Mauritania's colonels, even as a democratization process was supposed to be unfolding, the political system best approximates what Alfred Stepan describes as "sultanism" where "…there is a lack of rationalized impersonal ideology, ….[where the leader] acts only according to his own unchecked discretion, with no longer impersonal goals of the state."[24]

Regarding the merit of the independent impact of individual leaders to the analysis and understanding of political phenomena, Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollak offer a particularly persuasive argument. Though their study, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," focuses on the impact of individual leaders on foreign policy,[25] their argument and evidence applies readily, and even more so, to domestic politics in the African context. The extreme weakness of institutions and their inability to effectively constrain and serve as counterweights (or even

[23] Brownlee, p. 203.
[24] See Alfred Stepan, "Democratic Opposition and Democratic Theory," *Government and Opposition*, 32 (4), 1997, p. 660.
[25] Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollak, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security*, 25 (4), 2001, 107-146.

efficacious instruments) to the sultanic inclination of many African leaders, singularly military leaders such as Mauritania's colonels, give credence to these authors' thesis. Refuting the arguments of some political scientists against the usefulness of the study of the influence of individual leaders, among which that it "does not lend itself to the generalizations that political scientists seek," Byman and Pollak argue that in fact, "[i]ndividual personalities take on added significance when power is concentrated in the hands of a leader, when institutions are in conflict, or in times of great change."[26] They use lessons from history to not only build a strong case for the focus on individual leaders and their decisive impact on political events (domestic and foreign), but they go on to tease out sound hypotheses that can be tested and contribute to theory-building and ability to predict in international relations. They note for example that "[t]he personal characteristics and idiosyncrasies of Adolph Hitler let to the deaths of millions and changed the history of the world."[27] Closer to Mauritania's colonels, they analyze Saddam Hussein whose personal characteristics and proclivities they contrasted with that of Hafiz Al-Assad (of Syria) to highlight the impact of the former on the course of events in the Middle-East as a result also of decisions made domestically that were traceable to his personal characteristics and psychology. Byman and Pollak conclude that "Policymakers and politicians are right to pay attention to the goals, abilities, and idiosyncrasies of the world's leaders. It is time for scholars to play their part, helping better understand when and how individuals can make a difference,"[28] for better or worse.

This study proceeds from the postulate that in the absence of strong institutions and effective and credible checks and balances mechanisms, African heads of state, whether civilian or military, have typically little more to keep them in check than their innate sense of right and wrong, enlightened self-interest, and their ideological frame of reference (if any). Understanding the backgrounds, personalities, itineraries and modus operandi of Mauritania's colonels is therefore essential. It will provide a vista into how they approach running the Mauritanian state and, in particular, how they chose to address key challenges facing their country.

[26] Byman and Pollak, p. 108,109.
[27] Byman and Pollak, p. 115.
[28] Byman and Pollak, p. 145.

Investigating leaders, particularly military/political leaders, has never been easy. One of the difficulties stems from the apprehension of having to carry out what William A. Welsh has called "a kind of psychoanalysis from a distance."[29] Choosing the most suitable approach to pursue and the conceptual and methodological pitfalls to avoid when personality and politics are brought together, it is an outright daunting task, as scholars have made abundantly clear.[30] When the subject matter is heads of state, former military junta chiefs all of whom taciturn authoritarian figures, very likely afflicted with a more or less acute persecution complex, and (in some cases) a legendary spite, the task does not get any easier. Nevertheless, following the methodological guidance of Fred I. Greenstein and others, this study analyzes and interprets the major characteristics and key events in the lives of Mauritania's Colonels, their careers as military officers and political leaders in the context of Mauritanian politics. The approach is based on a number of conceptual postulates.

First, we concur with Greenstein that, "politics frequently is influenced by factors that are commonly summarized by the term 'personality'."[31] We further grant the self-evident fact that objective, independent factors, unrelated to central political actors do affect politics—both the process and the outcomes, regardless of the personality of those prominent actors. Therefore, this is not an exercise in reducing "political behavior into a mere epiphenomenon of individual personality" which Greenstein warned against.[32]

Of course, we are aware of the limits, criticisms, complexities, and conceptual difficulties —amply discussed by theoreticians of political psychology--[33] that are involved in the concept of 'personality.' There are indeed divergent conceptualization by psychologists --whose discipline is most identified with this concept-- and political scientists. We further readily accept Greenstein's use of 'personality' as applying to "the *broad* gamut of non political psychological attributes which lead to conclude that people are, for example, outgoing, hostile or phlegmatic –or that they have other, perhaps more complex personal qualities"[34] and personal

[29] William A. Welsh, *Leaders and Elites*, New York, McMillan, 1977, 48.
[30] See, for example Fred I. Greenstein, *Politics and Personality*, *Problems of Evidence, Inference, and Conceptualization*, New York, Northon, 1975; Glenn Paige, *The Scientific Study of Political Leadership*, New York, Free Press, 1977.
[31] Greenstein, 1975, 1.
[32] Ibid, xxii.
[33] See for example David G. Winter, "Personality and Political Behavior," in David Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis eds., *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, 100-145; also Greenstein, 1975,16-20 and 33-62.
[34] Ibid, 6. Our emphasis on broad.

backgrounds that are relevant to understanding and explaining many political events in which they are involved.

More explicitly, we also accept Jennifer Winter's conceptualization of personality as "an array of capacities or dispositions [the traits, motives, cognitions, and the social context that make up a leader] that may be engaged, primed, or brought forward depending on the demands of the situation and a person's own "executive apparatus."[35] Though it pays some attention to their personality (and thus their psychology), the study is also, indeed mostly, an analysis of the (political and sociological) dynamics, events, and phenomena that have their own weight and logic in Mauritanian politics but have also been molded, individually and collectively, by these Colonels/heads of state.

This analysis is part of a larger study based on field research in Mauritania, its neighboring countries, and France over several years. In addition to the consultation of archival documents, a large number of interviews were conducted and informal conversations had with former and current members of the military, civilian members of government and civil service as well as former officials of international organizations and members of the diplomatic corps who are acquainted with either of Mauritania's Colonels or with Mauritanian politics and society more general. Indeed, some interviewees, current or former collaborators, supporters or opponents have known these leaders personally even intimately over the last two or three decades.

[35] Winter, 2003, 112, 114.

Mauritania's Colonels: Portrayals

The Army that produced them

In 1978, when it took power, the Mauritanian military had swelled to more than ten thousand[36] increasing manifold from the three thousand men army it was just three years earlier, when it entered the disastrous war for the control of the Western Sahara. The army nevertheless still reflected more or less Mauritania's contradictions as a very much rural and nomadic, self-doubting, embryonic state. There were more or less coherent efforts on the part of president Ould Daddah to shelter it from the convulsions of a society and political system that were already being tested by domestic as well as international forces and dynamics.

It did not take long for the military to be affected by these convulsions and contradictions. In some instances, it even took the lead. For example, while corruption was not yet the systemic problem it later became, many of its officers who had been involved in the war effort against the Polisario had accumulated massive wealth, particularly those who commanded troops on the ground, or were involved in weapons procurement. The face of those developments became that of Colonel Ould Saleck, presented in the wee hours of July 10, 1978, as the chairman of the military junta that announced the end of Mauritania's first Republic, the *Comité Militaire de Redressement National* (CMRN). The era of the rule of the colonels had started.

Social origins

One of the distinctive characteristics all Mauritania's Colonels share is the "Ould" (meaning "son of") in the middle of their name, indicating that they are all "Maurs." While the structure and pronunciation of the name is shared with the *Haratins*, none of the colonels is a *Hartani*. Their names thus indicate that they are all "*white* Maurs," and though nothing in the name indicates this, they also belong to warrior tribes except, arguably,

[36] The Mauritanian army grew from 3,000 in 1975 to 12,000 in 1978 with a 17,00 peak in 1977. See U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1971-1980*, Washington, DC, 1981, p. 58.

Ould Taya who, interestingly, also happened to have lasted the longest in power. These "markers" are significant in the Mauritanian context. Though there were non Arab-Berber senior officers among the original 1978 junta (and all subsequent ones, increasingly as token), it was clear that military rule in Mauritania has had a distinctive Arab-Berber character. All Mauritania's colonels were born "under the tent" in a family with a nomadic lifestyle that typically lacks firm organizational and behavioral structures, and in which the ultimate loyalty is to the family and tribe—not the nation, which did not even exist then.

Even as members of warrior tribes, nothing predestined any of the colonels to be members of the then embryonic military or to become its most powerful and distinguished members. When the older colonels (Ould Saleck, Ould Haidallah, and Ould Taya) whose tribes are respectively *J'aavra*, *R'gueybat*, and *Smasside*, joined the armed forces, newly independent Mauritania barely had an army, and then Africa had not yet experienced the rash of military coup that was to come later. All have also in common a rather modest social origin. The three older colonels have in common to have attended the only high school Mauritania had prior to becoming independent, the *Lycée de Rosso*, located in the city of Rosso on the Senegal River, which is also the border with Senegal, and mostly populated by Non-Arabs. This is significant because it also means that these three colonels were, early on, exposed to the black, non-Arab population of Mauritania and mingled, and often clashed, with black schoolmates.

As to colonel Ould Mohamed Vall and colonel Ould Abdel Aziz, who are cousins, members of their tribe, the *Oulad Bousbaa*, have been present and carrying out commercial activities in Senegal for generations. Both speak fluent Wolof the national language and lingua franca in Senegal. As will be shown below, these details are not irrelevant to understanding how Mauritania's colonels have addressed what is referred to in Mauritania's political lexicon as "*la question nationale*," the "national question."

Military training and Careers

The Mauritanian army recruited both colonels Ould Saleck and Ould Taya from the teaching profession, where they started their respective careers. Like the first generation of officers, including Colonel Ould Haidalla, both got their initial and subsequent officer trainings in French military academies in the 1960s and early 1970s. Ould Haidalla, clearly more intelligent than all the other colonels, graduated from the prestigious Saint Cyr, which gave him an edge. Ould Saleck and Ould Taya were trained at Saumur. All three enjoyed an apparently well-deserved reputation of well-trained and competent infantry officers (with Ould Taya specializing in topography). All similarly enjoyed the respect of their fellow officers, albeit for different reasons and to different degrees, as discussed below. Colonel Ould Mohamed Vall also received initial officer training in a French military academy at Aix-en-Provence. Subsequently, he underwent further trainings in other French academies, but also at the Morocco royal academy in Meknes.

In contrast, Colonel Ould Abdel Aziz and most of the officers of his generation (1980s and beyond) were trained in Arab countries mostly in Morocco, Libya, Algeria, Iraq, and Syria. Ould Abdel Aziz started as a clerk at the treasury before receiving his initial military training at the Meknes royal academy in Morocco and subsequent upgrades in Algeria and Iraq. There are conclusive indications that he owes his military career to his cousin Colonel Ould Mohamed Vall who, as Director of National Security after the 1984 coup, and confident of the head of State (Colonel Ould Taya), pulled some strings to enable him to enter the pool of recruits and undergo officer training at the royal academy in Meknes, even though he did not meet the requirements.[37] Later still, Ould Mohamed Vall would intercede again to have his cousin be made the president's bodyguard and subsequently commander of the Presidential security battalion (BASEP). This command will enable him to pull off two coups d'état in three years.

In contrast to both Ould Taya and Ould Haidalla who pursued a rather quiet career in the military, colonel Ould Saleck was well known on the national scene prior to leading the 1978 coup which made him head of state

[37] This information was confirmed to me in a personal communication by an intelligence officer who worked closely with Colonel Ould Mohamed Vall at the National Security Directorate, in May 2010. Requested anonymity.

for about a year. Then Captain, and one of the highest ranking officers in the fledgling Mauritanian army, he was tapped in 1966 to enforce a state of emergency decreed by President Ould Daddah when the "national question" first burst on the national scene. 19 Non-Arab civil servants had written an open letter challenging "Arabicization" policies, which they described as racist and aimed at marginalizing the country's non-Arab populations. Captain Ould Saleck acquitted himself effectively--and brutally-- of his charge as he quelled the riots and strikes that ensued. Many black Mauritanians would lose their lives or go to prison while others were dismissed from the civil service.

Considered more amenable, colonel Ould Saleck was later tapped to replace a recalcitrant Chief of Army Staff who was reluctant to subordinate the army to the single party-state, *le Parti du Peuple Mauritanien*, then in power. He was again called back as Army Chief of Staff in 1976 as the country started to bear the brunt of the ill-fated Sahara war. Prior to that, he served as governor in three different administrative regions of the country. As to Colonel Ould Mohamed Vall, he was a freshly minted lieutenant when the 1978 coup was carried out. As a junior officer, he played only an insignificant role in it. He did not become prominent as a military officer until shortly before the 1984 coup carried out by colonel Ould Taya and his acolytes against colonel Ould Haidalla. Colonel Ould Haidalla then in power, was persuaded to appoint him as Commander of the strategic 6th military region which encompasses the capital, in replacement of one of his most loyal supporters, a *Hartani* Captain, Breyka Ould M'Bareck.[38] Shortly after that coup, and up to the August 3, 2005 coup against colonel Ould Taya that brought him to power, colonel Ould Mohamed Vall remained the omnipotent Director of National Security, the de facto second personality of the regime.

Personalities and Modus Operandi

Of Mauritania's colonels, Ould Saleck spent the least amount of time in power, and arguably had the least impact on the country, beyond leading the coup that transformed his country so thoroughly. Accounts of the unfolding of the 1978 coup and his tenure as head of state describe him as a

[38] In his book, *La Mauritanie et ses Présidents de 1958 à 2008*, Panafrika, Dakar, 2009, Mohamed Lemine Ould Haycen contends that he played a role in that appointment (p. 135). Breyka Ould M'Bareck confirmed to this author (in an interview in August 08, 2011) that his replacement was part of the plot to carry out the December 12, 1984 coup which brought Ould Taya to power.

decent, honest, sincere, gentle, fair-minded, but essentially weak and self-doubting man, whose values and objectives for the 1978 coup did not quite match those of his more ambitious and domineering colleagues in the junta.[39] These qualities and shortcomings did not serve him well when he was chairman of the junta as he was easily sidelined by the daring Colonel Ahmed Ould Bouceif in April 1979 when his cousin Major Jiddou Ould Saleck, killed in an accident, could not longer shield him. He essentially let them have their way and accepted to fade away after less than a year at the helm.[40] After his death, he was described by one of the historical figures of the Mauritanian opposition as "patriotic and just," and a rare bird among officers.[41]

In contrast to colonel Old Saleck's short tenure, when Colonel Ould Taya came to power in December 1984, quite unexpectedly, he ended up running the country for more than 21 years, and having by far the biggest impact on Mauritania. The December 12, 1984 coup was against colonel Ould Haidalla who, though he did not play an active role in squeezing Ould Saleck out of executive power, had been designated chairman by a divided and restless military junta, when Colonel Ould Bouceif was killed in a plane crash in May 1979.[42] A member of the *R'gueibat* warrior tribe that straddles northwestern Mauritania and the Western Sahara, Ould Haidalla had acquired the reputation of a highly capable, decisive, courageous but also honest and pious officer as the commander of the strategic military sector of Zouerate. He was known for his aversion to injustice and cardinal honesty. Though suspected of sympathies toward the Polisario Front, his fierce independence and patriotism were never in doubt. He also had an impulsive streak, a trenchant temperament. He did not hesitate to confront his peers. He also displayed authoritarian tendencies that marred his tenure in office.

The widespread respect for his ability and character was only matched by the fear he inspired, including among his colleagues in the junta. Tellingly, one of his closest companions is quoted as saying that colonel Ould Haidalla's "only weakness is that he fears nothing."[43] These

[39] Ould El Haycen, *La Mauritanie*, 73-92.
[40] See Ould Mohamed Saleck's interview with Ould Kaige, http://mauritanie-ouldkaige.blogspot.com/2008/08/30-ans-aprs-le-putsch-de-1978-mustapha.html (Accessed November 11, 2012).
[41] See, http://www.cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=637614 (Accessed December 20, 2012).
[42] Ould Hacen, *La Mauritanie*, 100-103.
[43] Quoted in Ould El Haycen, *La Mauritanie*, 104.

personality traits would impact greatly how he led the junta, governed the country and attempted to tackle its most pressing challenges. By all accounts, some of these qualities, particularly his independence and fierce nationalism, drove the French government to enable his overthrow by Colonel Ould Taya.

The personalities of Mauritania's last three colonels/heads of state could not be more contrasting with Colonel Ould Haidalla's forthright, blunt, even provocative persona. While Colonel Ould Mohamed Vall was a transition head of state and governed the country only 19 months, and Ould Abdel Aziz has been in power for six years so far, Ould Taya remained in power for 21 years and had the deepest impact of the country. It bears focusing a bit more on him.

Ould Taya has been consistently described as an uncharismatic, taciturn, spiteful man, who harbors all kinds of complexes. He was also depicted as an impulsive, morbidly insecure, narcissistic "petty tyrant" of uncommon drive, vindictiveness, and cunning.[44] Before the 1984 coup that propelled him to power, Ould Taya was generally perceived by many Mauritanians as a member of a reviled group of officers without political ideal or agenda, more concerned with enjoying the spoils of power (or the association therewith) than the political orientation or the well-being of the country.[45] Prior to 1984, contrary to other officers, he sought no political base of support among his *Smasside* tribesmen, nor belonged to the countless Arab nationalist groups that competed within the army.[46] A shy introverted man who kept to himself, preferring the company of old western movies and the enjoyment of refined alcoholic beverages, he avoided making tough decisions or expressing his opinion. This discretion and triteness may well be the reason he was made minister of defense twice and Prime Minister at the height of divisions within the junta under Ould Saleck and Ould Haidalla respectively. Until December 12, 1984, colonel Ould Taya did not have the respect and deference other military leaders such as Ould Haidalla or Ould Bouceif inspired. However, while he is also

[44] Jemal Abel Nasser Ould Yessa, series of interviews, Paris June, 2003; Mohamed Aly Ould Louly, interview Paris, June 28, 2003; H. Zeibratt C. (Pseudonym), interview Nouakchott, May, 2004, May 2010, Mohamed Vall Ould Oumeir, interview, Nouakchott, April 2004; Soumare Abdelaziz, interview, Paris, June 2003.

[45] Mohamed Nassirou Athie, "Il y a Onze ans, le 16 Mars," *Al Beyane* No.14, march 11-16, 1996, p.8.

[46] Since the 1978 coup, there has been a proliferation of Arab nationalist groups in the Mauritanian army. See Anthony Pazzanita, "Mauritania's Foreign Policy: In Search of Protection," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 30 (3) 1992, 288-300.

described as not particularly bright, his other qualities his adversaries overlooked helped his rising to and maintaining power for more than two decades. Among these, his keen sense of, even paranoia about, security issues, his own security in particular, and uncanny skills in manipulating intelligence even gossip (of which he is a voracious consumer) to his own ends.[47]

The challenge to his regime in the mid-1980s by non Arab elites with whom he felt close (see below), and the death in 1990 of his first wife of Lebanese descent who had kept him away from the tribal politics most men of his status would naturally indulge in were two key developments that transformed him. He became conscious of his vulnerability in an environment steeped in tribalism and regionalism (and, of course, the 'national question'), and hence of the necessity to go back to the tribal fold, symbolized by his second marriage to a *Smasside* girl. He quickly became cynical and disabused, and developed a manichaean view of the "national question" in particular. His outlook on power, political opposition, and Mauritania's relations with the rest of the world hardened. At the height of his power in the 1990s, colonel Ould Taya seemed to display all the symptoms of what political psychologists have labeled "malignant narcissism," a leader who "maintains some sort of stability via paranoid defense. He dichotomizes the world into good and evil elements, projecting his dark side and vulnerabilities onto an external source, transforming an internal conflict into an external one," which enables him to transform "that conflict into an external battle between himself as the representative of good and the scapegoat as the representative of evil."[48]

The experience of jousts for power in previous juntas taught him what became one of his favorite maxims, "power is indivisible."[49] It is fascinating that given colonel Ould Taya's limitations compared to the original members of 1978 junta, he managed to become the "last man standing" and to have such a long tenure as head of state, succeeding in eliminating or taming all potential challengers, military as well as civilian.

[47] Personal conversations with a former Mauritanian ambassador to the United States, and former advisor to Ould Taya.
[48] Betty Glad "Why Tyrants Go Too Far: Malignant Narcissism and Absolute Power," *Political Psychology*, 23 (1), 2002, 21.
[49] Mohamed Mahamoud Ould Maloum, interviews, Paris, June, 2003 and Dakar, May 2004.

Ironically he was ousted by the two men he trusted most, his director of national security colonel Ould Mohamed Vall and colonel Ould Abdel Aziz, commander of the presidential security battalion (BASEP), set up as a veritable praetorian guard (for some a private militia) to protect him. Both men spent nearly two decades serving Ould Taya's regime and doubtless adapted their personality to their missions as regime bulwarks. Ould Mohamed Vall, the brightest and most sophisticated of the two cousins developed a reputation of being only interested in wealth accumulation and nothing else, which of course, suited colonel Ould Taya just fine. He certainly had no political agenda beyond the survival of the regime he was serving. His motivation was simply pecuniary self-interest and for that was willing to carry out all of Ould Taya's desiderata. He certainly did not become affiliated in any discernible way with the various Arab nationalist groups that every now and then would hold sway with Ould Taya.

While colonel Ould Abdel Aziz too accumulated a substantial fortune, because of his training in Iraq, Syria and Algeria, dominated by Arab nationalist ideologies, he has been associated with Ba'athism. He is said to have also embraced at times Nasserism (another competing and antagonistic pan-Arab nationalist ideology prevalent in Mauritania). This may only be an indication of the opportunism that is said to be one of the dominant traits of his character. Like colonel Ould Taya, he is also described as vindictive, taciturn cynical, impulsive and prompt to offend friend and foe. Like Ould Taya still, because of his personal history, he was very close to non-Arab segments of the population, before developing a hostile, even racist attitude toward them,[50] no doubt a result of his cozying up to pan-Arab ideologies during his training in Arab countries.

[50] According to a commentator who seems to know him, colonel Ould Abdel Aziz has expressed and displayed, on occasions, racist views and tendencies. See Abdelkader Ould Dehmass "*Carte d'identité : Pour mieux connaître le Général Aziz*," http://fr.ufpweb.org/spip.php?article1676&lang=bm (accessed November 25, 2012).

Addressing Mauritania's Main Challenges: The Record

Long before the onset of the era of the colonels, Mauritania faced a number of challenges inherent in its nature as a small, poor, multiethnic and unlikely nation-state. One of these challenges, "the national question," was epitomized (and deepened) by what is still referred to as the "1966 events," mentioned above. Its reality confronted the first military regime very early on when it tried to set up a civilian national consultative council. Following the (unwritten) rule instituted under the 1960-1978 civilian regime, the Military junta set aside a quota of roughly one fourth for the non-Arab component of the population on the consultative body, leading to its boycott by the appointed non-Arab notabilities. This only reminded the military regime of this vexing challenge. What happened a generation later (1986-1992), and the reemergence of the issue of slavery was to transform this challenge into *the* most critical, indeed existential, challenge facing the country. How the colonels addressed it is edifying on the promises military leaders invariably make to resolve the pressing challenges facing their people, which often (though not in this case) serve as the pretext for take power.

The second critical challenge the colonels faced, which was inherent in the nature of the military regime they headed is a typical promise: Returning the military to its barracks and ushering in a genuinely democratic regime based on the subordination of the military to the civilian authority and ending military meddling in politics. The fact that (General) Ould Abdel Aziz is still in power heading a military regime in all but name[51] nearly thirty five years after the 1978 coup, clearly indicates that this promise, made in the first communiqué, and in every successful coup communiqué since, has not been fulfilled.

[51] See http://africanarguments.org/2012/10/22/mauritania-president%E2%80%99s-shooting-reveals-military-regime-parading-as-a-democracy-by-boubacar-n%E2%80%99diaye/ (Accessed December 25, 2012).

The "National Question"

The "national question," has dogged everyone of the colonels whether they tried to resolve it in earnest or not, although under colonel Ould Taya it got much worse, making it even harder for his successors to attend to it. Today, it is still intractable and ever threatening to the very existence of Mauritania and the stability of West Africa.

The first colonel to confront this challenge was Ould Saleck. The first real political crisis his regime faced was the decision of 17 non-Arab personalities to withdraw from the consultative council set up to advise the junta.[52] As mentioned earlier, under the civilian regime, he was the military officer who was charged with repressing the movement of the "19" Black Mauritanians functionaries who challenged Ould Dadadah's "Arabicization" policies in 1966. Whether his prior experience as the enforcer of the get tough policies of the civilian regime influenced his attitude, or because of the chaotic first steps of the military regime, his indecisiveness precluded tackling boldly and sensibly this thorny issue, and soon thereafter he was ousted. The controversial policy of "Arabicization" and its deceitful conflation with Islam that was at the heart of the "national question" was pursued with renewed determination under the succeeding Colonels. An example was the creation in 1979 of the ISERI (Higher Institute for Research and Islamic Studies), with activities entirely in Arabic excluding most non-Arab Mauritanians of the intelligentsia, whose language of instruction, until then, was French.[53]

Trying to meet the challenge fell to colonel Ould Haidalla when he came to power in June 1979. To manage the divisions within the junta, and blunt the potential challenge of Arab Berber officers from more prominent tribes, he made a concerted effort to lean on non-Arab officers and adopted a friendly attitude, and indeed championed the need for policies that gave black Mauritanians a sense of belonging. He gave a higher profile to black officers, including for the first time in Mauritania's history, a prominent national role to a *hartani*, Captain Breyka Ould M'Bareck. However, in

[52] See Colin Legum (ed.) *African Contemporary Record: Annual Survey of Documents,* Vol. XI (1978-1979) New York, Africana Publishing Company, 1981, B-702, 706.
[53] See Catherine Taine-Cheikh, "Les Langues comme Enjeux Identitaires," *Politique Africaine*, 55, 1994, 61-63.

addressing this challenge, Ould Haidalla's most noted contribution was to issue Decree, 81-234 on November 9, 1981 "abolishing slavery," following the scandal created by the selling of a slave incident on an open market, in Atar (Northern Mauritania) and the agitation created around this event by an underground movement, *El Hor*.[54] A flawed decree which, in addition to not being implemented at all, provided for indemnification for slave owners "in conformity with Islamic law." It also signaled the appearance, thenceforth, of *Sheri'a* as guiding doctrine for policy. In other words, the piety of Ould Haidalla had found a conduit in public policy. By the time of his ouster in December 1984, Ould Haidalla had succeeded only in attenuating temporarily the ethnic tensions, putting slavery on the national agenda, without addressing in any substantive way their root causes. Indeed his introduction of *Sheri'a*, the toothless decree abolishing slavery, and the 1983 land reform ordinance would serve to make even more urgent the necessity for his successors to resolve these related issues. As will be made clear, all ultimately failed miserably. In fact, during his ensuing long tenure, colonel Ould Taya only exacerbated them manifold. The scale and consequences of the repression visited on black Mauritanians under his regime between 1986 and 1992 is unparalleled.

Among all Arab Berber officers Ould Taya was, however, the least likely to be accused of racism or animosity toward blacks. He was arguably the closest to them long before coming to power. Black officers, Colonels Anne Amadou Babaly and Yall Abdoulaye in particular were instrumental in the success of the coup that brought him to power. Nevertheless, always simmering, the 'National Question,' has cyclically flared up and led to serious shake-ups of the polity and often to the repression of black Mauritanians. The promulgation of ordinance 83/127 on June 5, 1983 (under Ould Haidalla) to institute a new land tenure regime in the soon to be economically profitable Senegal River valley added to the long-standing suspicion of black Mauritanians that, true to the nature of the Arab-Berber "system," deliberate policies to disenfranchise them were at work.

It was in this context that, in 1986 two years into the regime of Ould

[54] 'El Hor' means freeman. It is a tolerated political movement set up by the *Haratines* to fight the manifestations and legacy of slavery and for the improvement of the lot of the *Haratines* in Mauritanian Society. While many have adopted a moderate stand and collaborated with

Taya, the FLAM (*Forces de Libération Africaines de Mauritanie*) an organization formed in 1983, published '*le Manifest du Negro-Mauritanien opprimé*' (the manifesto of the oppressed Black Mauritanian). The pamphlet, widely distributed at the OAU summit in Harare, Zimbabwe, humiliated and infuriated Ould Taya. Given his record of association with blacks, true to his character, he felt personally betrayed, which embittered him. It led to a wave of dismissals (including the Interior Minister, colonel Anne Amadou Babaly), arrests, trials and imprisonment in harsh conditions of prominent *Haalpular* intellectuals and civil servants, including the poet and diplomat Taine Youssouf Gueye, his one time benefactor and mentor.

This crackdown occurred in the context of behind the scenes rivalries between pan-Arab nationalist factions (*Ba'athists*, of Iraqi allegiance and Kaddafi-inspired *Nasserists*) among others, vying for strategic positioning within the fledgling Ould Taya regime, as well as various tribal repositioning. To worsen an already explosive situation, in December 1987, three black officers, alleged leaders of an (amateurish) coup plot, were executed and dozens of their alleged accomplices imprisoned in conditions that would lead to the slow death of many of them.[55] In an atmosphere of extreme ethnic tension, it was only a matter of time before this situation degenerated in the most egregious management to the 'National Question' Mauritania ever experienced.

The French phrase *passif humanitaire,* the equivalent of 'human rights deficit,' has now become the signal phrase in Mauritanian political vocabulary to allude to what was to ensue. It refers specifically to the 1986-1992 'events,' as the mass killings and deportation of black-Mauritanians are prudishly called. Arab nationalists elements within the military and state bureaucracy[56] saw in a border dispute with neighboring Senegal a golden opportunity to solve once and for all the long-standing ethnic tensions in the country.[57] Amnesty International established that the Ould

the political authorities of the moment, the most radical wing, now led by Biram Ould Abeid, the leader of IRA, an abolitionist civil rights organization, is in the opposition and has pursued in international fora the politically embarrassing issue of slavery. IRA has teamed up with *SOS-Esclaves*, an anti-slavery Human Rights organization to carry out mass actions on the ground and legal action to assist slaves gain their freedom.

[55] For a survivor's account of the ordeal, see Alassane H. Boye, *J'Étais à Oualata: Le Racisme d'État en Mauritanie*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 1999.

[56] For an account of the influence of Ba'athists on Ould Taya's regime and the agenda they have pursued see Pazzanita, 'Mauritania's Foreign Policy,' 295-300.

[57] Mark Doyle, 'Nouakchott's New Nationalism,' *Africa Report* 35, (3) Sept.-Oct. 1989, 39.

Taya government was involved in the most outrageous atrocities against black citizens even during the fateful initial April 1989 incidents.[58] What became a full-blown policy of marginalization and physical elimination, through ethnic cleansing was amply documented by foreign governments and non-governmental organizations alike.[59] These practices were so uncommon even by African standards of political exclusion and harsh repression that they were labeled an informal apartheid.[60]

Between 1989 and the end of 1992, up to 120,000 black Mauritanians were stripped of their citizenship and deported or forced to flee to Senegal and Mali.[61] Human rights observers have also documented the extrajudicial killing of (at least) 500 black Mauritanians most of whom from the ranks of the military.[62]

A pre-first Gulf War cozying up to Saddam Hussein financed and encouraged a set of outright racist ideologies and policies, which Ould Taya fully embraced, aimed at 'keeping Mauritania Arab.' These policies' main objective was to anchor Mauritania in the Arab world supposedly to ward off what Baathists saw as the 'black peril' at the Western end of the Arab World. A resulting second-class citizenship for blacks and repression to eliminate their resistance to cultural assimilation were justified by a need to uphold Islam and national unity. This perpetuated a consummate amalgam between Islam (the religion of all Mauritanians) and Arab identity peremptorily claimed by most Arab-Berber cultural and intellectual elites, and just as adamantly rejected by non-Arab Mauritanians.

In 1993, a "civilianized" military regime still headed by colonel Ould Taya (though he resigned from the army) succeeded in passing a law that

[58] Amnesty International, '*Mauritanie 1986-1989: Contexte d'une Crise*,' Les éditions Francophones d'Amnesty International, 1989, 11; also Janet Fleischman, 'Ethnic Cleansing,' *Africa Report*, 39 Jan-Feb. 1994, 46.

[59] See, for example, Human Rights Watch/Africa, *Mauritania's Campaign of Terror: State Repression of Black Africans*, New York, Human Rights Watch, 1992; U.S. Department of State, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1992, Mauritania*, Washington, D.C. US Government Printing Office, February 1992 162-170; and Country Report on human rights Practices for 1993, 177-185.

[60] The oppressive practices of the Ould Taya regime in particular were not as sophisticated or as codified as those of apartheid South Africa. However, opponents and neutral parties have made a strong case as to the similarities between the effects of the repression of Blacks in both countries. See Garba Diallo, *The other Apartheid?* Uppsula sweden's Nordiska Afrikains, Institute, 1993; FLAM Manifesto '*Mauritanie: 30 ans d'un apartheid méconnu,'* October 1989 (pamphlet), Dakar; and Committee on Foreign Hearing before the Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations and on Africa, 19 June 1991, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

[61] The UN High Commission for Refugees estimates the number at 65,000 as of June 1991 in Senegal and Mali. Other estimates are higher. See Fleischman, p. 45-46.

[62] Human Rights Watch, "Mauritania's Campaign of Terror."

granted amnesty to all who were involved in the 1989-1992 "events." Without ever formally admitting to the repression and its consequences or vowing to address them, Ould Taya pursued policies of "national reconciliation" aimed primarily at coopting the elites of the victimized populations as Cedric Jourde has aptly documented.[63] While his regime fiercely denied that slavery still existed (only admitting to its vestiges), he did appoint members of servile strata of the population in high positions, as members of the government and even as Prime Minister, in an effort to blunt the effects of his approach to the "national question," but also as a divide-and-rule strategy. None of these actions amounted to deliberate policies to resolve the underlying issues: the disenfranchisement of blacks and the continued enslavement of many Mauritanians, all covered by a semi-formal Arabo-Islamist ideology.

By August 2005 when he was overthrown, the "national question" had festered into an open wound that, although omnipresent and a subtext to every political, economic, social or cultural issue, had become a taboo subject that was sure to poison conversations and heighten tensions. His successors inherited this situation although, as key security pillars of Ould Taya's regime, both colonel Ould Mohamed Vall and colonel Ould Abel Aziz were important actors in dealing with it.

Though the August 3, 2005 coup was not motivated and was not even influenced directly by the "national question," its authors could not ignore it. Almost immediately after the dust settled, the issue of the thousands of refugees still in camps in Senegal and Mali and vociferous exiles as part of the "*passif humanitaire*" of the Ould Taya regime became salient and was pushed on the agenda by all who saw in the coup an opportunity to address it at long last. However, the junta, the Military Council for Justice and Democracy (CMJD), was headed by none other than colonel Ould Mohamed Vall who, as director of the notorious national security apparatus for nearly twenty years under Ould Taya, has probably participated in the conception and in the faithful implementation of the policies that created the human rights deficit in the first place. Furthermore, up to one third of junta members were cited by Human Rights groups, and victims and

[63] Cedric Jourde, "Ethnicity, Democratization and Political Drama: Insights into Ethnic Politics in Mauritania," *African Issues*, 29 (1&2), 26-30.

survivors of killing and torture as majors actors in the killings, torture, or deportations.[64] Very soon, in the 19-month transition he was heading, Ould Mohamed Vall cleverly found a pretext not to open officially a national conversation on this particular topic. He argued deviously that given its complexity and sensitivity, this is not an issue to be addressed by a transition regime and that only a democratically elected president and his government will have the legitimacy to tackle such a problem.

In a speech in Kaedi, a city in the south where some of the exactions took place, he delegitimized the call for a solution to the human rights violations and the return of refugees. Using insulting terms, he likened human rights advocates to cartoon characters, and denied that there were exiles, indicating cynically that Mauritania's borders were open. Indeed, as the political campaigns got under ways for the parliamentary and presidential elections, he decreed that the "*passif humanitaire,"* the issue of slavery (which he denied even existed), and re-joining ECOWAS[65] were off limit topics during the political campaigns. So, throughout the transition period, while very much on the mind of the political class, the "national question" was not on the agenda of the junta, in part because colonel Ould Mohamed Vall, its chairman, and many of its members would have had a lot to account for. Addressing it as a matter of national concern and urgency had to wait until the civilian president took office in April 2007. In addition to enacting a law criminalizing slavery and starting the process for the orderly return of refugees, for the first time, President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi officially acknowledged the "*passif humanitaire*" and the need to resolve it for national reconciliation. The policies he started to implement in this regard were part of the unstated reasons for his overthrow by colonel Ould Abdel Aziz who thereby inherited the still sulfurous "national question."

Having overthrown a democratically elected president who dared to dismiss him along with three of his cronies, Ould Abdel Aziz needed all the help he could get to legitimize his power immediately after he carried out the coup. Although not as implicated (his name was never cited) as his cousin Ould Mohamed Vall, in the "*passif humanitaire*" Ould Abdel Aziz

[64] Civil society groups, particularly those created by victims and survivors of the human rights deficit related events between 1986 and 1992 have publicized a list of dozens of uniformed personnel who were denounced by survivors as torturers and murderers. See, http://www.avomm.com/LISTE-DES-ASSASSINS-PRESUMES-RAPPORT-DE-MISSION-MAURITANIE-DU-02-AU-15-DECEMBRE-1992_a73.html (accessed November 25, 2012).

[65] In 2000, Ould Taya withdrew Mauritania from the regional economic organization under fallacious pretexts. It is widely believed that is

could not ignore it and indeed needed black Mauritanians on his side in his efforts to remain in power, given the fierce opposition he encountered. As chairman of the junta, the State High Council (HCE), Ould Abdel Aziz opted for symbolism. Using a powerful concept in Islamic culture, the "prayer for the dead," he organized a high profile such a prayer in memory of the victims. He invited most organizations representing the victims of the Ould Taya era exactions, in Kaedi, calling for forgiveness and national reconciliation.

The initiative was transparently insincere and widely perceived as just a clever bid to garner support from black Mauritanians in anticipation of the struggle he would face to remain in power and eventually for presidential elections he was determined to contest. When he prevailed in legitimizing his power in 2009, the "national question" receded quickly from his agenda. Indeed, Ould Addel Aziz had no qualms stating in an interview that slavery was a non-issue in Mauritania.[66] As to the "*passif humanitaire*" aspect, he was content to appoint for its resolution a reviled sidekick, General Adama Dia, and set up a commission to monitor it and make whole victims who could be identified, in cooperation with victims' associations believed to be politically supportive of his regime. In other words, the "national question" as a fundamental political impediment to a harmonious co-existence of Mauritania's communities on an equal basis and in a democratic and multicultural country has not been taken up in earnest.

This long-standing approach, adopted since 1978, lingers and the challenge remains therefore unmet. As the controversy surrounding the ongoing efforts at carrying out a national registration scheme showed,[67] it remains a hot button issue that is bound to continue to poison Mauritanian politics and some day lead to large scale violence. Violence could come as surely from a resurgent antislavery movement that has radicalized under the leadership of a charismatic, Malcolm X-like leader, Biram Ould Abeid who garnered nearly 10 % of the votes in the June 2014 presidential

was to distance it from Sub-Saharan Africa and integrate it more in Arab North Africa.

[66] See his interview to KASSATAYA, a web-radio, http://www.canalrim.info/article2480.html (Accessed 01/17/2013).

[67] The discrimination black Mauritanians continue to face in this critical process of registering Mauritanians prompted the set up of a militant organization, "*Touche pas à ma nationalité*" (hands off my citizenship) to denounce and counter discriminatory practices of functionaries in charge of the census.

elections. It is an incident away from plunging Mauritania into a "racial" civil war of unpredictable consequences. In August 2014, for example, in the village of Niabina in southern Mauritania, inhabited by black Mauritanians, members of an Arab-Berber tribe laid an armed siege with the help of state authorities and members of security forces, terrorizing and humiliating them after a member of the tribe disappeared and was presumed killed by the villagers. [68] He was to turn up hundreds of miles away. This incidence came close to ignite ethnic violence on a large scale, and, as a prominent political and opinion leader noted in a piece meant to sound the alarm, it also shed light on the open secret that Arab-Berbers appear to be heavily armed with the complicity of state authorities and preparing for and inter-community showdown.[69] In November 2014, tensions flared up again when Biram Ould Abeid the leader of an anti-slavery organization and, since the last presidential election a consequential politician, was arrested along with other black leaders and condemned on trumped up charges to prison terms. It is widely believe that the trial was a blatant use of the justice system by a vindictive colonel Ould Abdel Aziz to settle scores given the verbal abuse he took during the presidential campaign. It was also a deliberate effort to silence a charismatic opponent with growing popularity and satisfy large segments of Arab-Berber intelligentsia and (religious) opinion makers incensed by Ould Abeid's virulent rhetoric, and (ever more serious) threat to Mauritania's iniquitous political and social order..

Of course, the nature of all the military regimes, whether civilianized or not, made another challenge just as daunting: withdrawing the military from the political arena and instituting a genuine democracy. This promise, made by all Mauritania's colonels, has yet not been delivered on either.

[68] Editorial: Siège de Niabina, quand l'arbitraire écrase la loi! (le Terroir No. 12), available at: http://fr.ufpweb.org/spip.php?article4965 accessed 8/02/2105.
[69] Lô Gourmo Abdoul, "L'armement des civils et le laxisme orienté de l'Etat comme à Niabina sont, à terme, une grave menace contre la paix civile," Available at http://fr.ufpweb.org/spip.php?article4965 (accessed 8/01/2015).

Demilitarizing and Democratizing Mauritania

The presence of Ould Abdel Aziz as head of state and president "democratically elected" of Mauritania and his reelection with nearly 82 % of votes symbolize the failure of Mauritania's Colonels to deliver on the promise made by every one of them on coming to power.[70] To be sure, it has never been an easy task for African juntas to fulfill one of the promise they systematically make upon coming to power, to return the army to its barracks and usher in a democratic order, which the regime they just overthrew supposedly was unwilling to do. Of all colonels, Ould Mohamed Saleck seems to have been the most sincere in wanting to fulfill this promise. He was the first to fail, not so much because of suddenly awakened personal ambition and addiction to power as was the case for the others, but because, as he put it, his colleagues in the junta "did not appreciate [his various initiatives to implicate civilians early on in running the country to prepare a transition to civilian rule] because they did not see themselves leaving power so soon."[71] Fundamental divergence in the junta, on a range of issues, and most definitely on a rapid withdrawal from power can explain his brief tenure at the helm. In the minority on this issue, he was forced to resign, and tellingly, soon thereafter the civilian national advisory council supposed to be the first step toward civilian rule was rapidly scrapped.

Until April 2007, when colonel Ould Mohamed Vall handed over power to the civilian Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, it cannot be said that a genuine process was initiated by any of the colonels to transmit power to civilians. What made the 2005-2007 transition exceptional was that, almost immediately after the coup was consummated and amid clamorous outcries in the international community, and in order to purchase acceptance, the military junta accepted to issue an ordinance barring all its members and the transition government ministers from standing for

[70] Claude Welch, Jr., *No farewell to arms? : Military Disengagement from Politics in Africa and Latin America, Boulder, Westview Press, 1987.*

[71] See "10 Juillet 30th Anniversaire du coup: Moustapha Ould Mohamed Saleck Parle à Ould Kaige," available at

elections during the transition. As has been argued, even during the somewhat checkered transition he led, colonel Ould Mohmed Vall tried to hang on to power through the ultimately unsuccessful gambit of the "Blank ballots," and had hatched a "delayed self succession" scheme that was only derailed by the 2008 coup colonel Ould Abdel Aziz carried out.[72] In this case, as in the cases of Ould Haidalla and Ould Taya, awakened personal ambition, the corruption of power, and the pressure of tribal and family members pursuing their own personal interest, *not* the military institution per se can explain the continued military rule. The experience of Mauritania's colonels, does not seem to conform to Eric Nordlinger's thesis that the considered corporate interests and ideological preferences of the military institution as a whole determine the involvement of soldiers in politics, their management of power, and their withdrawal from politics.[73]

In the case of colonel Ould Abdel Aziz, his control of the quasi-militia presidential security battalion (BASEP) (in addition to the long standing purposeful weakening of the regular military by colonel Ould Taya) allowed him to ignore any other consideration than his thirst for power and accumulation of wealth. Nonetheless, the "*passif humanitaire*" remained a threat for a few powerful members of the top military brass. This was added motivation for Ould Abdel Aziz and his accomplices to want to take and retain power in 2008. While Ould Haidalla did not apparently even think about starting the process of what Claude Welch has called "personal transition"[74] in the early 1980s when it was fashionable on the continent, Ould Taya and Ould Abdel Aziz, Pulled off one each, seventeen years apart.

Ould Haidalla's relatively short tenure and the other challenges he was facing, including the aftermath of the March 1981 bloody coup attempt that resulted from the deep divisions in the junta, and the management of the Sahara war, left him little space to really think seriously about a transition to civilian rule. Indeed, the coup attempt was used as a justification to dismiss Mr. Sid'Ahmed Ould B'neijara, a civilian technocrat associated to his regime as Prime Minister and to signal the path toward a transition to

http://www.leveridique.info/article3384.html (Accessed November 17, 2012).

[72] See Boubacar N'Diaye, "To Mid-Wife—and Abort—a Democracy: Mauritania's Transition from Military Rule, 2005-2008," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 47(1), 2009, 129-152.

[73] See Eric Nordlinger, *Soliers in Politics: Military Coups and Governments*, Englewood Cliff, NJ, Prentice-Hall Inc, 1977.

[74] This is a process whereby a junta chairman removes his uniform, runs in tightly controlled presidential elections and, of course, wins. See Welch, "The Military Withdrawal from Politics," 1974, 225.

[75] Navy Captain Moustapha Diop revealed this in a 2004 interview. See http://odh-mauritanie.com/actualite-911-rencontre-avec-diop-

civilian rule. Any plans to transition to civilian rule were clearly abandoned by 1982, given the strong opposition within the junta.[75] Instead, Ould Haidalla initiated a populist mobilization scheme called *structures d'éducation des masses* (Structures for the Education of the Masses) aimed at garnering popular support for the military regime. By the time he was ousted, the idea of transitioning toward civilian rule was all but abandoned. According to an influential member of the junta, colonel Haidalla's push for that transition was defeated by staunch opposition by the majority of the members of the junta after tense debates. [76] However, it is doubtful that, if colonel Haidalla really wanted to carry out a genuine transition, he would not have been successful. After all, his strong personality and drive had prevailed over the same divided junta in pushing for the Algiers accords that extirpated the country from the Sahara war, and in getting recognition for the Arab Sahraoui Democratic Republic, all of which were just as testing undertakings.

After more than fourteen eventful years, it fell to colonel Ould Taya to formally try to meet this part of the bargain Mauritanians were supposed to have entered into with the 1978 coup. Following the crushing defeat of his Iraqi ally in the first Gulf war, the loss of support in the Arab world, and at the urging of the French (his only support left) whose president François Mitterrand had introduced the La Baule doctrine,[77] he had little choice but to jump on the bandwagon of the democratization process that was taking hold on the continent. Given the "events" that took place between 1986 and 1992, it was unimaginable that Ould Taya could allow himself to lose power through the ballot box. The drafting of a new constitution in 1991, a process he tightly controlled, led to pluralist elections aptly labeled an "electoral putsch," and thirteen years of a "paper democracy."[78] The military remained very much in charge despite Ould Taya's resignation from the army in order to run for president as a civilian.

Of course, only the military could call out Ould Taya's bluff of having met the promise the original junta made in July 1978 (and his own in 1984)

moustapha.html (accessed 01/17/2013).

[76] Ibid.

[77] At the Annual Summit with former French colonies in June 1990, in La Baule in France, President François Mitterrand had conditioned French financial aid on which all depended, on the institution of multiparty democracy.

[78] Peter Da Costa, "Democracy in Doubt," *Africa Report* 37, 3, (1992), 60-63.

as it did through the June 2003 bloody coup attempt which had him on the run for 48 hours, and more decisively the August 3, 2005 successful coup. However, before the transformation he underwent in 1986, Ould Taya's instinct—surprising progressive and democratically minded (given what was to follow), had initiated what appeared to be a genuine attempt to associate civilians to the management of the country. Though still not allowing political parties, he had organized pluralist municipal elections in Mauritania's largest cities and given a degree of freedom to elected mayors and municipal councils (some controlled by unfriendly personalities) to manage some cities. To this day, it remains unsettled whether this was a first step in a genuine process of military disengagement from politics or another clever ploy to keep state power in his hands while allowing limited political participation in an effort to pacify active clandestine opposition groupings.

Since his August 6, 2008 coup, Ould Abdel Aziz is the latest junta leader to pretend, yet again, to have fulfilled the military's pledge to withdraw and install democracy in the country. Mauritania analyst Noel Forster has chronicled accurately and insightfully his single-minded and elaborate maneuvering to retain power and thwart every effort by political parties and civil society forces to reverse his coup and continue the democratic experiment made possible by the election of the civilian president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi.[79] When he carried out his 2008 coup as Commander of the BASEP, a well-armed quasi-militia presidential security battalion, Ould Abdel Aziz had come to equate his staying in power with remaining alive, much like colonel Ould Taya before him 1991. In his case this was because when he carried out the 2005 coup, he made too many enemies within the armed forces and among powerful forces in Mauritanian society (certainly in the powerful *Smasside* tribe (Ould Taya's)) to justifiably worry about his safety and indeed his life. Just as Ould Taya from whom he seemed to have learned a lot, he was able to convince a few top brass officers in the army and most importantly among the command structure of BASEP, to tie their fate to his. It is true that to some of these officers, the direction in which President Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was taking the country, particularly his handling of the human rights deficit, was not reassuring. In the end, as in other deceptive attempts

[79] Noel Foster, *Mauritania: The Struggle for Democracy, Boulder,* First Forum Press, 2011.

to return Mauritania to civilian democratic rule, this one too came short, and only brought a sense of a permanent crisis likely to lead to violence and instability (at the least to yet another coup by another group of frustrated officers). The conclusion is inescapable that, colonel Ould Abdel Aziz's success in remaining in power so far symbolized "the return to the quasi-military order that held sway for more than twenty one years (…). This certainly does not bode well for stability and democratization in Mauritania."[80]

Conclusions

This study has examined the political evolution of Mauritania over the last thirty years in light of the scholarly literature on democratic transitions, causes of conflict, and the study of political phenomena through a focus on leadership characteristics. This study of the evolution of little-known Mauritania can improve our understanding of not only the independent role the characteristics of authoritarian leadership plays in "non-transitions," but also the dynamics and potential outcomes of repeated failure to usher in truly democratic and inclusive political systems, and to address critical challenges vulnerable countries face. The study proceeds to comparatively examine the relevant personal attributes, itineraries, and policies of the five colonels who, since 1978, have come to power and tried with varying fortunes to meet two critical challenges their country has been facing since the first fateful coup. The first challenge, known in Mauritania's political parlance as the "national question," is the difficult co-existence of the country's diverse cultural/ethnic communities. It has worsened and degenerated into massive human rights violations between 1986 and 1992, and remained a source of tensions. It has the potential of leading to severe instability[81] for both Mauritania and West Africa. On the second challenge, the oft-promised military withdrawal from politics and the ushering in of a genuine democracy, the colonels did not escape the familiar syndrome of military leaders succumbing to the allure of power and scheming to maintain power after starting an often deceptive "democratization process." As the continued presence of (General) Ould

[80] Boubacar N'Diaye, "Mauritania: The Military, Elections and the Elusive Quest for a genuine democratization," in Abdoulaye Saine, B. N'Diaye and M. Houngnikpo (eds.) *Elections and Democratization in West Africa: 1990-2009*, Trenton, Africa World Press, 2011, 323.
[81] The US ambassador to Mauritania, Jo Ellen Powell, acknowledged as much in a recent speech. See http://csis.org/multimedia/audio-mauritania-crossroads (Accessed January 08, 2013).

Abdel Aziz clearly indicates, more than thirty years on, though with the trappings of a democracy for cover, in Mauritania, the military is still very much in power.

Palpable and enduring political and social tensions have resulted from this legacy of failures of Mauritania's colonels and increased the probability of a violent confrontation after the last elections boycotted by a radicalizing opposition. [82] Immediately after the June 2014 election, after rejecting the election results, and as if to underscore the dangers that stalk Mauritania's stability, a coalition of the main political opposition parties issued a statement in which they observed ominously that the "transfer of power through the ballot box remains *impossible* under Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz which paves the way to all forms of instability" (italics added).[83] More worrisome still, these elections have also led to the rise of *Tawassoul*, the opportunistic Islamist party, as the second political force in the parliament (next to the presidential party-state). This only wetted the appetite for executive power of its impatient and well-funded cadre of Islamists bent on emulating their Tunisian and Egyptian brethren.

As a consequence of the crisis in neighboring Mali, many jihadists and Tuareg irredentists have found safe haven in Mauritania and enjoy the covert support of Mauritania's Arab nationalist-dominated security apparatus. Furthermore, while colonel Ould Abdel Aziz has succeeded in convincing the West that he is their man in the Sahel in their "crusade" against terrorism and jihadists, thereby securing their blind support, domestically, he has cleverly entertained an ambiguous language toward Mauritanian Salafists and Arab nationalist movements. He has encouraged their growing influence on political affairs, in a bid to sap the growing strength of those he considers his most threatening foes: "moderate" Islamist movements such as Tawassoul, and the anti-slavery radical movement IRA, led by Biram Ould Abeid. This game, based on short term, even reckless, personalized considerations, does not seem sustainable in the long run when ethnic, intra-communitarian, and political tensions are sharply on the rise. These tensions are all related to the

[82] Boubacar N'Diaye, Mauritania elections: Aziz victorious, but opposition primed for futu**re** confrontations, available at http://africanarguments.org/2014/07/01/mauritania-elections-aziz-victorious-but-opposition-primed-for-future-confrontations-by-boubacar-ndiaye/ (accessed March 22, 2015).

[83] The radical opposition political parties are under the umbrella of the FNDU (*Forum National pour la Défense et l'Unité*). See FNDU, "*Déclaration*" of June 27, 2014 (pamphlet).

worsening economic situation of the country due to the sharp fall of export commodities such as Iron and gold, on top of extremely poor mismanagement of resources.

This eminently unstable mélange is only one incident away from starting yet another disaster in Mauritania with inevitable spillover in other West African countries. This is the reliable conclusion of one of Mauritania's most astute observer and stakeholder, Lawyer Fatimata M'Baye, the president of the Mauritanian Association for Human Rights (AMDH). She recently impressed on a French journalist that no one should be deceived by "the apparent peaceful, indeed nonchalant façade" Mauritania exhibits, adding that "the situation is at such a boiling point that some day, it will be worse" than in neighboring countries such as Mali or Senegal [in 2012 when a near insurrectional situation prevailed]. [84]

Since his June 2014 reelection, many observers have seen in President Ould Abdel Aziz's feverish visits in the country's Wilayas (regions), a sign that there may be in some truth in persistent rumors that he is preparing the ground for maneuvers, including a referendum, to amend the constitution to give Mauritania a new (parliamentary) political system in order to get around the limits articles 26-28 put on presidential mandates. The ambiguity of the answers the president has given to repeated questions on his intentions in this regard seem to suggest that he may not be ready to leave power at the end of his second term. More than ever, Mauritania has entered an uncertain and hazardous phase of its political evolution. This could have dire consequences on West Africa's laborious quest for stability.

[84] Nicholas Beau, "Main Base sur Nouakchott." November 23, 2013. <http://mondafrique.com/lire/bakchich/2013/11/22/main-basse-sur-nouakchott>, Accessed January 3, 2014.