

Mauritania needs direct, not representative democracy

Regrettably Mauritania continues to face challenges in international relations, political stability, social cohesion, and economic development. More details on these issues can be found in chapter contributions to [North Africa: Politics, Region, and the Limits of Transformation \(2008\)](#) and [Les Etats-Unis et le Maghreb: regain d'intérêt? \(2007\)](#), where it was noted that the 2007 transition to democracy would NOT end the vicious cycle of cliquish military committees and factious political parties in Mauritania.

This short opinion article [which was solicited and then rejected by Carnegie's *Arab Reform Bulletin* for the September 2008 issue] reiterates the above conclusion and argues that representative democracy, the sacred cow of contemporary political discourse, is partly to blame for deepening political factionalism and instability in Mauritania as highlighted by the 2008 institutional crisis and military coup. It suggests that Mauritania needs to (1) get out of the box of representative democracy, (2) envision new forms of direct democracy, and (3) take new directions in regional and international geopolitics.

With the inauguration of President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in April 2007, Mauritania completed what was widely celebrated and considered a genuine transition from military to civilian rule following the August 2005 military coup. The transition was praised by Mauritania's political and military elites, welcomed by regional and international partners and observers, and dubbed by many as a "model" for Africa and the Arab world. Its landmarks included the national referendum on constitutional amendments in June 2006, the election of *el-majlis el-watani* (the 95-member National Assembly) in November and December 2006, the election of *majlis esh-shuyukh* (the 56-member Senate) in January and February 2007, and the presidential elections in March 2007.

Fifteen months later, the military booted out President Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and rebooted the political system. This move came on 6 August 2008 when fired presidential guard commander General Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz arrested and deposed President Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in a bloodless coup hours after the latter had fired Ould Abdelaziz and three other top commanders of the armed and security forces. The coup leaders established the Higher State Council and promised new presidential elections (first scheduled for June 6, 2009, then rescheduled for July 18, 2009 thanks to an agreement between Mauritanian politicians mediated by Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade, the facilitator designated by the African Union). This was a new peak in a three-month old political crisis, which had escalated with the dismissal of the government of Prime Minister Zein Ould Zeidane and the appointment, dismissal, and reappointment of a government led by Prime Minister Yahya Ould Ahmed el-Waqf.

The coup put Mauritania again on international headlines as did previous coups and attempted coups in 1978, 1979, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1987, 2003, 2004, and 2005. In fact six of the eight Mauritanian presidents since the country's independence from France in 1960 came from the military. The two civilian presidents (the first and the seventh) were selected and backed by the French colonial administration and the Mauritanian military, respectively. Indeed 'militarism' was deeply rooted in Mauritania's pre-colonial tribal communities, where sometimes a single 'warrior' tribe dominates over 80 percent of the population in some regions of the country. But while the recent coup has deepened multiparty factionalism within Mauritania's political elites and disappointed many of Mauritania's regional and international partners, it has nevertheless received the backing of the majority of Mauritania's elected lawmakers. How could this happen?

First, leaving aside the obvious economic situation, one can argue that the newness and weakness of Mauritania's state institutions combined with recurrent multiparty factionalism and security crises have always set the stage for coups. In contrast to political parties, military institutions embody more cohesion and organization simply because rank-and-file soldiers are armed and must obey orders of their military superiors. Recurrent security crises have also contributed to the disproportionate growth of state security apparatuses and helped them justify budget appropriations for high-tech equipment and intelligence-gathering tools. The two most recent military coups were staged by the heads of the security apparatuses (specifically the Director of National Security and the Commander of the Presidential Guard), NOT the heads of the Armed Forces (Army, Navy, and Air Force).

Second, Mauritians are increasingly disappointed about repeatedly electing officials to define policies, enact laws, allocate resources, and declare war on their behalf and in their absence. They want direct political participation, which

involves more than simply casting a vote once in a while. They want direct, not representative democracy. In many countries, the political model of representation instead of participation and the electoral technique of simple majority instead of consensus have only led to violently divided and polarized societies as seen in the aftermath of elections in Algeria (1991), Ukraine (2004), Palestine (2006), Kenya (2007), Zimbabwe (2008), etc...

Third, egocentric Eurocentrism has largely discredited representative democracy. This could be illustrated by Alex de Tocqueville's love for democracy and support for the dispossession of the Algerian people by French settlers as "a necessity of our civilization." It can be witnessed today in Israel ("the only democracy in the Middle East") where the process of importing and settling the now more than five million Jewish settlers in Palestine has dispossessed and displaced the now more than ten million Muslim and Christian Arab Palestinians who live inside and outside Palestine. Even President George W. Bush has often evoked the goal of "spreading democracy" to the Middle East as a rationale for the appalling destruction of the Iraqi state, society, and infrastructure.

Fourth, the idea of direct democracy is based on the principle that real power should be in the hands of the assembly of citizens (not their representatives) who choose to participate in a given constituency. Consensus should constitute the mechanism by which *important public affairs decisions* are made. When consensus is not reached, either decision should not be made or "majority" decision should not be imposed or be binding on the "minority." Direct democracy rejects the coercive 51-against-49-percent "majority rule" simply because 51 percent of the voters should not rule over 49 percent who voted against them. Direct democracy nurtures social *diversity* and preserves social *unity* better than the divisive multiparty politics of the winner-takes-all voting systems. The face-to-face meetings in local assemblies or popular congresses will likely (1) transcend the Right/Left and Majority/Minority divides, (2) have little room for corruption (where everyone knows everyone else) or extremism (liberal, religious, nationalist, universalist, etc.), (3) provide an emotional, intellectual, and organizational environment for channeling societal strength and vision, and (4) open a social crucible for melting down most or all of the man-made income, ethnic, class, gender, racial, tribal, and geographic inequalities.

In her search for the right government, Mauritania has so far tried in vain a variety of single-party, multi-party, and military government models. Returning to any of these failed models could be viewed in light of Proverbs 26:11 ("As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly"). The remaining government models not tried in Mauritania include (1) the single-family rule model in the eight Arab monarchies, (2) the *wilayet al-faqih* rule model in Iran, (3) the *Taliban* rule model in pre-11 September Afghanistan, (4) the *failed state* model in Yugoslavia and Somalia, and (5) the *jamahiriyya* model in Libya.

Hoping neither to provoke nor to irritate the mystic lovers of representative democracy and traditional geopolitics, I would humbly suggest that Mauritians should (1) think carefully about the 'popular congresses' of the *jamahiriyya* system (a modern *jamaa* system) as a possible political model, (2) militate vigorously for the establishment of the United States of Africa, (3) break off diplomatic and other relations with the State of Israel, and (4) call upon Asian Arabs to join the strategic African Union and perhaps form a much stronger African-Arab Union grouping. In the absence of such a regional grouping Mauritania (with a population of 3.3 million and a GDP of \$2.7 billion) has little leverage over the EU (with a population of 500 million and a GDP of \$16 trillion) or the USA (with a population of 300 million and a GDP of \$13 trillion). Without such a reform that envisions a clear-cut *political* theory and *geopolitical* identity, the scenario of *the blind leading the blind* will probably continue to mark the elitist struggle for power and power succession, while Mauritania will likely and regrettably remain a compassless country wading through the murky waters of economic globalization and political fragmentation. This brings to mind the Quranic reminder: "Who is better guided: someone who falls on his face, or someone who walks steadily on a straight path?" (Quran 67:22).

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His published works include "Mauritania between the Hammer of Economic Globalization and the Anvil of Multiparty Factionalism," In *North Africa: Politics, Region, and the Limits of Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2008); "U.S.-Mauritania Relations and the *Coriolis Force* of Normalization with Israel," In *Les Etats-Unis et le Maghreb, regain d'intérêt?* (Alger: Centre de Recherche en Economie Appliquée au Développement, 2007); "Geopolitical Genesis and Prospect of Zionism," *International Journal of the Humanities* 2(2), 2006; "Currency Devaluation and Resource Transfer from the South to the North," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93(2), 2003; "The Non-Jewish Origin of Zionism," *The Arab World Geographer* 5(1), 2002; "The New Global Command Economy," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 17(2), 1999; and *Global Restructuring and Peripheral States: The Carrot and the Stick in Mauritania* (Lanham, MD: Littlefield Adams Books, 1996). <http://faculty.isuad.indstate.edu/mouldmey>