

# review

# the

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## Breaking point

Eight months after a coup toppled Mauritania's first freely elected president, neither he nor the junta that deposed him will concede. As both sides battle for international legitimacy, will a new election break the stalemate? Nicholas Schmidle reports

I could see the heat radiating off the paved motorway up ahead when the trouble started. We had been driving across the savannah for almost an hour, following sandy tracks that crisscrossed a parched landscape made of acacia trees and decomposing cattle corpses, each one's dehydrated skin pulled like a drumhead over its rib cage. The scene was so desolate it looked lunar, but what appeared to be chunks of black moon rock were actually piles of goat dung. I sat in the front passenger seat of a shiny Nissan pickup. Mohamed, the son of the toppled president of Mauritania, drove. My friends rode behind us in a beat-up gold Mercedes tied with a tow rope to the Nissan's rear bumper. And up ahead, a navy blue Land Cruiser pickup that belonged to the gendarmerie, or military police, was approaching fast.

A day earlier, three friends and I had rented the Mercedes to make the journey to meet Mohamed's father, Sidi Cheikh Ould Abdallahi. In August 2008, Abdallahi had been overthrown in a military coup. In December, he was still internally exiled, confined to his ancestral village of Lemden, 240 kilometres east of the capital of Nouakchott. We followed a ribbon of motorway out of the capital that unrolled through the desert over ranges of burnt-orange sand dunes. The final 30 kilometres of the journey took us off the tarmac and onto an unmarked "road" through scrubby desert. Midway there, our Mercedes made a loud, metallic rattle and broke down. Soon it grew dark. One friend climbed onto the hood of the car and pointed his mobile phone into the air, searching for a signal. We eventually contacted Abdallahi's aide in Lemden, who sent a pickup to fetch us. Abdallahi was asleep when we arrived, five hours past my appointment. His family slaughtered a goat and we stayed the night.

The following morning I walked down Lemden's sandy alleys, past more goats, a pile of entrails and a herd of plainclothes intelligence agents. Abdallahi, a 70-year-old man with soft hands and a lazy eye, welcomed me into a meeting room rimmed with couches and drawn curtains. He had risen to power abruptly and fallen just as fast, removed from office less than 16 months into his term.



# review

# \$22m

Amount, in US dollars, of aid to Mauritania that America suspended in 2008. This included \$15m for military-to-military funding, \$4m for peacekeeping training and \$3m in development assistance



An abandoned structure outside Zouerate, near the area where Islamist militants engaged the Army in 2008.



A tourist shop in Nouakchott displays photographs of General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who heads the ruling junta.

## Both sides have shaped their strategies with an eye toward American approval rather than Mauritanian desires

→ Mauritania, continued from 1

"Before I begin, I want you to understand Mauritania's unique experience with democracy. We had free elections with the help of the international community and became a hope in the African and Arab worlds," explained the ousted president. "And the United States showed that it was really impressed with our democracy from the beginning." Abdallahi ticked off examples of cooperation with the Americans dating back during his tenure.

"And now?" I asked, knowing that all American developmental and military assistance had ceased after the putsch.

Abdallahi replied: "Mauritanians are thinking that the US's clear, firm position against the coup should continue."

Later that morning, Abdallahi's son Mohamed offered to drive us back to our stranded Mercedes. Before leaving Lemden and venturing into the desert, Mohamed pulled up beside a wall fronting one of the family homes and ordered a dark-skinned servant to retrieve his driver's license. When he rolled down the window, gusts of wind blew sand into the truck. A rectangular shack stood on the other side of the road. Mohamed said the secret police had occupied it after the coup. "They don't appear when foreigners are visiting," he said. "They are like vampires. They only come out at night."

We'd been zipping through the desert for about an hour when the gendarmerie truck appeared coming toward us. They timed their encounter perfectly. Apparently the vampires had called ahead.

Mohamed steered to one side, but the gendarmerie truck immediately realigned. Mohamed then steered to the other. The truck followed. Seemingly locked in a game of chicken, the distance between the two trucks (one pulling a hobbled Mercedes, mind you) quickly shrunk. Just seconds before a head-on collision, Mohamed stepped on the brake. One of the gendarmerie officers jumped out. The man was balding and wore an olive green uniform with a white scarf tied around his neck. He was hollering in Hassaniya, a local dialect of Arabic, and pointing at me. Mohamed and I stepped out of the Nissan. My friends jumped out of the Mercedes. A raucous dispute erupted.

"What's going on?" I asked Mohamed. He stood tall and wore black designer sunglasses.

"It seems like you're being arrested," he replied.

The guard with the white scarf ordered me to follow him to the nearest checkpoint for questioning. There two guards escorted me and

my translator into a blue-walled shack outfitted with two cots and a corrugated metal roof. The guards interrogated us and copied down our testimonies into a log. The one with the white scarf lounged on a cot leaned against the wall. He leafed through my passport, page by page, sometimes studying the details of a particular visa, sometimes just flipping. He seemed to be in no rush. I asked him what they planned for me. He flashed a disingenuous smirk. "We are waiting for orders from our superiors."

▶▶▶ Mauritania straddles the desolate, thorny belt of territory between Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa, otherwise known as the Sahel. Arab civilisation ends at the northern edge of the Sahel, and "black" African civilisation begins at the southern edge. The land in between is one of the most sparsely populated regions of the world. Mauritania, with a population of three and a half million people, is larger than France and Germany combined. The majority of the territory is ungoverned, and for all except the hardest of bedouin, inhospitable. Policing is nearly impossible.

Owing to its bareness, the United States took a special interest in the Sahel, and particularly Mauritania, after September 11. Al Qa'eda and its copycats had some history in the region. During the 1990s, Osama bin Laden had bunkered down in Sudan under the protective guard of the Islamist regime in power there. At the same time, a civil war in Algeria had turned nasty when "Afghan Arabs", those Algerians who had waged war against the Soviet army in Afghanistan, got involved. Their ideas transformed the armed struggle from a nationalist one into a jihad. In

the minds of the Salafis, those who sided with the government – or even those who simply failed to side with the insurgents – were branded as infidels and killed. More than 200,000 people died over the course of the insurgency, which ultimately produced the militant outfit known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, or GSPC.

For the most part, the Islam practised in Mauritania stayed insulated from these regional and global trends. Notwithstanding the parade of coups, countercoups and numerous failed plots, Mauritians seemed to be docile and non-confrontational. As Mohamed Lemine Ould El Kettab, a former diplomat and the president of the Club of Mauritanian Intellectuals for Democracy and Development, told me: "As Maliki" – the school of Islamic jurisprudence that most Mauritanians follow – "we abide by the law, whatever the law is, and whoever brings the law. Some say this is too conservative, that there will never be any change if we go this way. But this is our tradition."

"What explains the recent spike in terrorism?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Violence is very new to our society," he said. But the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had energised a generation of restless youth in Mauritania, disaffected by both worldly events and their own government's seeming support; Nouakchott kept close ties to the United States and Israel. (In the aftermath of the Gaza war, however, the junta has severed relations with the Israelis.) Some of these young men flocked to ready-made organisations like GSPC.

In 2002, the State Department christened the Pan-Sahel Initiative, a programme whereby American Special Forces operatives trained

militaries in Mali, Chad, Niger and Mauritania. But assistance came with a caveat: an expectation of good governance. So when, in 2005, the Mauritanian military overthrew a 21-year dictatorship, the Americans promptly suspended their counterterrorism and development aid. A colonel named Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, having detected the rules of the game, helped to establish a transition government and pave the way for a presidential election.

Abdul Aziz, the brains behind the 2005 putsch, supported the candidacy of Abdallahi, then a relatively unknown economist, who won the nation's first transparent election in April 2007. The international community, especially the United States, applauded the event as a triumph of civil society over the country's entrenched military leadership. But the reality was more nuanced. As Abdul Aziz himself reminded listeners at a public rally last December: "Democracy was a gift from the army."

Abdallahi quickly set about tackling taboo issues at home: he criminalised slavery and welcomed back black African refugees who had fled to Senegal in the late 1980s under threat of ethnic cleansing by the "white" Moor community. (Mauritania is populated by a roughly equal mixture of "white" Moors, "black" Moors and black Africans who live along the Senegalese River. Both Moors speak Hassaniya and consider themselves part of the wider Arab world. Historically, the "white" Moors enslaved the "black" Moors and suspected the black Africans of disloyalty to the state.) He also pardoned numerous Islamists who had been imprisoned during the transition government, some on charges of inciting or carrying out violence. Both the 21-year regime of Maouya Ould Taya and the transition govern-

ment tagged all Salafis as budding terrorists and simply threw them in jail.

According to one jailed Salafi leader, a preacher named Ahmed Mezid, it was only during his and his companions' incarceration that the militants made inroads. "Some of the young people became afraid of the whole system and went to Algeria [to train with GSPC]," Mezid said. "When they came back to Mauritania ... they found an unjust system. This was when extremism flourished. The youth didn't have any religious guides and the system was against them."

To counter this impression, Abdallahi met with some of the more mainstream Salafi leaders and asked for their help in defusing the increasing radicalism of the youth. He also legalised an Islamist party called Tawassoul, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. To burnish his image as a pious man, he also built a mosque on the grounds of the presidential palace – all of which earned him the ire of the military men who had helped put him in power.

Meanwhile, Abdallahi strengthened his relationship with the Americans, who increased their counterterror aid to Mauritania. The US hanged a King Air twin-turboprop aeroplane, outfitted with sophisticated espionage toys, in the town of Atar, 250 miles north-east of Nouakchott. The plane flew surveillance missions over the northern Mauritania in search of smugglers and al Qa'eda activity. Approximately 80 Army and Marine Special Forces troops trained an elite counterterrorism unit. "There were even rumours of secret detention centres here," Abdallahi told me in Lemden.

Yet Abdallahi faced growing domestic challenges. He suspected Abdul Aziz of scheming against him as Abdallahi watched his majority in the parliament deteriorate. Of course, the global economic recession didn't help much either, and since it happened on Abdallahi's watch, many Mauritians blamed Abdallahi for mismanaging the economy. "Sidi [Abdallahi] was a direct victim of the financial crisis," one western diplomat in Nouakchott explained to me in December. "And Abdul Aziz has been making out since food and gas prices have dropped."

It was exceedingly difficult to adjudicate between the Abdallahi camp's allegations that Abdul Aziz and the generals were holding secret meetings and buying off politicians, and the junta's contention that Abdallahi's parliamentary support eroded spontaneously. What is clear, however, is that Mauritanian politicians are an opportunistic bunch and

will support whoever happens to be holding power at that moment.

On the morning of August 6, Mauritanian state radio broadcast a presidential decree announcing the firing of the five most senior military officers, including Abdul Aziz. Abdul Aziz was one of only three generals in the country, and he headed the presidential guard unit. An hour later, when Abdallahi's security detail showed up to take him to work, the chauffeur escorted him instead to a reception room in the headquarters of the presidential guard. Abdallahi sat in a waiting room. "Abdul Aziz came in and asked me to withdraw my decree," he recalled. "But I refused." By that evening, Abdul Aziz had placed Abdallahi under house arrest and announced that he had taken over.

The international community, led by the United States, France and the African Union, immediately and almost unanimously condemned the putsch. In response, Abdul Aziz and his cohorts fought for legitimacy by branding Abdallahi as soft on terrorism. They pitched the coup as a necessary step to fight al Qa'eda in Mauritania. When al Qa'eda issued a statement the next day condemning the junta, it seemed to confirm their arguments. Others suspected there might be something more nefarious at play. "A lot of these types of reports [about a growing threat from al Qa'eda in Mauritania] have surfaced post-coup," said a US State Department official. "It's intriguing... but a savvy leader of a military junta knows which cards to play."

▶▶▶ Last September, hardly a month after the coup, a convoy of militants belonging to the North Africa chapter of al Qa'eda, known as al Qa'eda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), crossed from northern Mali into Mauritania. According to top military officials in Nouakchott, the trucks spent a day racing toward Zouerate, a busy mining town that is home to Mauritania's iron mining facilities – the hub of an otherwise struggling economy. Mauritanian army officials scrambled a patrol to intercept the terrorists before they reached Zouerate.

The army patrol was ambushed by the AQIM fighters, and the Mauritanian military, hoping to stop the terrorists before they returned to their base in northern Mali, asked the US Embassy to use the King Air. But it had flown out of the country two days earlier, and the Special Forces trainers had left too. In fact, almost all Washington's counterterrorism assistance, along with tens of millions of dollars in development aid, had evaporated after the coup.



French television footage of Sidi Ould Sidna, an Islamist militant arrested for the murder of four French tourists last year, being extradited to Mauritania.

**Democracy was a gift from the army**  
Abdul Aziz

People per square kilometre in Mauritania. The world average is 45



On the road to Lemden, where Mauritania's deposed president, Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, has lived in internal exile since the coup last August. Photographs by Guillaume Bonn / Think Pictures

"It is stunning to me that the United States and al Qaeda have taken the same position against us," said Colonel Mohamed Ould El Hadi, the Director General of National Security. He was among the five senior officers fired by Abdallahi who then, in turn, overthrew their former boss. I met Hadi, a tall gangly man with a thick moustache stained the colour of old bricks from a voracious smoking habit, in his palatial office last December. He, like other members of the junta, reiterated a political will to fight terrorism, even as he showed little interest in deciphering the nuances within Mauritania's Islamist and Salafi communities. Hadi stubbed out one cigarette and immediately lit another. "Al Qaeda wants to destabilise our country," he said.

Mauritanian jails are brimming with alleged al Qaeda members. Late last year, Amnesty International published a report titled, "Mauritania: Torture at the Heart of the State." It argued that, despite coups and the changes in leadership, torture remains the preferred interrogation technique in the prisons. I asked Gaetan Mootoo, the author of the Amnesty report, to guess how many of those accused of terrorism were true, hard-core jihadis. "It is difficult to say because most confessions are obtained under torture," he said. Jeremy Keenan, a professor at the University of Bristol and the author of several books on the Sahara region, believes that the Mauritanian army has got carried away labelling all its opponents as Islamists. "Sure there are some Islamists, but what about the others? If you wind people up long enough they get pissed and then you see these self-fulfilling prophecies."

Despite the junta's best efforts to up-sell the threat posed by al Qaeda, I wondered if their mission may have lacked purpose and urgency. It certainly lacked resources. The commander of the garrison nearest to Zouerate had only a few trucks at his disposal and no running water in the bathroom attached to his office. While in the waiting room outside Hadi's office, I marvelled at a uniformed assistant who sat watching episodes of *Kojak* with Arabic subtitles. And on Hadi's own desk, two monitors displayed live feeds from cameras positioned in the hallways and outside the perimeter of the building — as if to suggest he was more worried about a counter-coup than any militant activity.

I asked Hadi about Sidi Ould Sidna, a Mauritanian militant arrested last year for the murder of four French tourists in a town east of Nouakchott. Sidna had previously trained in an AQIM camp in north-



Abdallahi at home in Lemden, which Washington still considers the de facto capital of Mauritania.

ern Mali, and was among the Salafis released from prison by Abdallahi in the summer of 2007.

"Where did Sidna fit into AQIM's organisational structure in Mauritania?" I asked. "Was Sidna operating his own cell? Taking orders from Algerian militants? Or running freelance?"

Hadi interrupted me mid-sentence. "That's not important. What's important for you is to know that they have a high level of professionalism."

The junta has lobbied for legitimacy in the West by claiming Abdallahi was weak on terrorism. They allege that, by legalising an Islamist party and meeting with moderate Salafi preachers to ask their help challenging the rising influence of militants, Abdallahi paved the way for a string of terrorist attacks in Mauritania over the past two years. The charges mostly ring hollow, however; Abdallahi's initiatives represent the kind of "soft" approach to countering extremism that Pakistani, Afghan and Egyptian leaders might do well to heed in dealing with their own Islamist oppositions.

In Lemden, which Washington considers the de facto capital of Mauritania, residents and Abdallahi's hangers-on can hardly complete a sentence without talking of "democracy" and "elections".

Members of the junta, by contrast, speak only of "terrorism" and "al Qaeda", though without many specifics. Both sides have shaped their strategies with an eye toward American approval rather than Mauritanian desires.

They are keyed in to other popular catchphrases in Washington, too. A doctor and supporter of Abdallahi who I met in Lemden told me: "This junta is launching an Islamic Nationalist movement reminiscent of Saddam's Baathism," referring in part to the history of close ties in the 1970s and 1980s between Iraq and Mauritania. But the doctor and Abdallahi's other supporters didn't seem to understand that allegations of Baathism were more likely to raise alarms in Washington seven years ago. The rhetoric in Washington had shaped the polarisation of politics in Nouakchott: to interview either side was to be assaulted with half of the Bush administration's own talking points. But both camps seemed to miss the fact that the debate in Washington had long since moved on.

The Obama administration has signalled that it plans to continue with its predecessor's policies towards Nouakchott: shortly after the inauguration, the state department reached out to Abdallahi to reaffirm that Washington still recognised him as the legal head of state.

But the junta isn't taking Obama's indifference silently. Abdul Aziz seems to have realised that democracy now plays better in Washington than counter-terrorism: if the threat of al Qaeda can't rescue them from becoming an international pariah state, maybe an election will. The junta recently announced a presidential poll in June 2009, and Abdul Aziz declared that he would contest the race.

Will Washington continue to sup-

port Abdallahi if Abdul Aziz wins the election? While Abdallahi (who has not declared whether he'll run) remains confined to his village, Abdul Aziz is likely to become more popular the longer he stays in power. A western diplomat in Nouakchott estimated that the junta was spending approximately \$25 million a month preparing for polls. The money went to subsidising the price of gas, raising government salaries, promising land titles to the poor living in slums on the outskirts of Nouakchott and funding a series of barnstorming tours for Abdul Aziz through Mauritania's oft-neglected interior, where he has rarely failed to attack the former president.

Abdul Aziz's steadfastness and the junta's campaign to slander Abdallahi has left the former president's son Mohamed ill at ease. As Mohamed drove his Nissan truck across the savannah on the way to retrieve our derelict Mercedes, he described his life trapped in a village with only 2000 people. "Half of them are informers," he said, who relay Abdallahi's every move back to military headquarters. "We have adjusted to the fact that my father went from being an elected leader to a political prisoner overnight. But what happens next? The military will have to justify their actions to the public and they might just put my father on trial." It was at that very moment when thegendarmerie truck appeared up ahead, blocking our way.

They ended up keeping me in the blue-walled outpost for about an hour. Finally, the guard with the white scarf's phone rang. Apparently it was his "superiors". They cleared him to let us go.

Dusk was nearing. My translator and I flagged a taxi heading towards Nouakchott. It was two days before Eid and the driver had stuffed three goats in the trunk. We passed through two military checkpoints without incident. We slowed down at the third, hoping the guard with the AK-47 would wave us through. He didn't.

"Passport," he barked in Hassaniya to the driver, pointing at me. I handed it over. The guard, seemingly in his late teens, yelled to his colleague, who shuffled over to our car.

"Is this the one?" one asked. "Yeah, that's him," the other responded. The teenager with the AK-47 squeezed into the back seat of our taxi and directed our driver to the nearest police station. The goats whined in the trunk.

A slovenly man was sitting behind a desk in a dark room, waiting for us when we arrived. He asked us all the same questions that we had already answered back at the other checkpoint, and scribbled down all the same information into a logbook. When asked how long he imagined his interrogation would take, he offered the same response: "I am waiting for orders from my superiors."

Thirty minutes later, he took a phone call, spoke for a minute, and then hung up. "You're free to go now," he said. Smiling disingenuously, he added, "It seems that we mistook you for someone else."

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In early December, I joined Abdul Aziz's convoy on a visit to Kiffa, 400 miles east of Nouakchott. Most of us made the 10-hour journey by car, but Abdallahi and a small group of advisers flew into Kiffa on a tan, DC-3 propeller aeroplane. The plane landed exactly on time ("This is a first," my friend exclaimed as the DC-3 appeared on the horizon five minutes before 9am) and a military band played a handful of ceremonial tunes. Abdul Aziz is a short man in his fifties. He wore a dark suit and a dour expression; the pomp on the runway made him look slightly unnerved.

Before the visit to Kiffa, there was a stopover in the town of Tintane, which illuminated the likely results of the elections scheduled for June. The mayor of Tintane belonged to Tawassoul, the Islamist political party Abdallahi had legalised over the opposition of the generals. A journalist back in Nouakchott had led to me to believe that the

party might lead protests in Tintane against Abdul Aziz. Instead, we could barely make it through a throng of tens of thousands of locals who had come out to show their support. And who introduced the leader of the junta? None other than the mayor himself. "I want to express thanks to the high military council on behalf of the people of Tintane. We appreciate the military council's new direction and orientation." So much for a fierce, uncompromising opposition.

"This was not even really a coup. Think of the events on August 6 as more of change for the better," a primary school teacher told me after the mayor's introduction. "We have more rights now than ever."

Later that afternoon, at a rally staged in a grass lot adjacent to the Kiffa governor's house, Abdul Aziz approached a simple lectern that stood at ground level on a carpet laid atop the sand. A squad of teenage troubadours had just performed. Several thousand people stood in attendance. When some pushed too close to the dignitaries seated on the stage (a mix of military officers and cabinet members backing the junta, along with local politicians seeking the new government's favour), police beat them back with wooden batons. Those who weren't being thrashed by overzealous cops cheered and chanted: "Long Live the Army!" A man pulled me aside and said in broken English, "All of Mauritania is Abdul Aziz-isation," which I interpreted to be a mockery of the American criticism that Abdul Aziz had hijacked the democratic process. One group held up a banner that read, in Arabic, "International sanctions are not the solution."

Abdul Aziz had been speaking on a populist, anti-corruption platform since the coup. "The former president says the international community should embargo your country," Abdul Aziz declared with his signature deadpan tone. "He says this will make the people mad and that they'll revolt against us generals... But if he really loved your country as much as he says, he would have fixed your problems, rather than sending countless missions overseas at the expense of the state."

And about the prospect of isolation and sanctions by the African Union, European Union, and the United States?

"If we can get international help, fine," Abdul Aziz said. "But if not, we'll manage on our own."

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