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MAURITANIA: President faces few threats to his rule

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Abstract (summary)

Mauritania presidential polls and Abdel Aziz's grip on power.

Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz was re-elected on June 21 with almost 82% of the vote. All of the main opposition political parties and personalities boycotted the polls, citing concerns about the independence of the electoral commission. Having largely boycotted November's legislative elections, the opposition has increasingly marginalised itself, not least because the president's astute diplomacy and strongman image have rallied tribal, business and international support behind him.

Full Text

SUBJECT:Mauritania presidential polls and Abdel Aziz's grip on power.

SIGNIFICANCE:Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz was re-elected on June 21 with almost 82% of the vote. All of the main opposition political parties and personalities boycotted the polls, citing concerns about the independence of the electoral commission. Having largely boycotted November's legislative elections, the opposition has increasingly marginalised itself, not least because the president's astute diplomacy and strongman image have rallied tribal, business and international support behind him.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

For ordinary Mauritians, subsistence living is key and Abdel Aziz will only have limited ability to control price shocks.

Elite corruption, urban unemployment and the systematic marginalisation of black Mauritians will remain unresolved political issues.

While support for Islamist political parties has grown, jihadist violence will probably remain in abeyance in Mauritania for now.

There was never any doubt that Abdel Aziz would win Mauritania's second presidential election since its 2008-09 transition from the bloodless coup that he led. Political opposition to the president is weak, divided and has little influence beyond the political (Nouakchott) and economic (Nouadhibou) capitals.

Opposition fatigue .

While there were several noisy protests in Nouakchott and elsewhere in 2011-13 as the opposition coalition sought presidential commitments to dialogue, reform and the delay of elections, these never gained much momentum. As such, Abdel Aziz did not feel the need to make any concessions.

As with the National Assembly elections in November-December last year -- in which the president's Union for the Republic won a narrow majority -- the reaction of the boycotting parties to the results has largely been resigned and muted:

Three unsuccessful presidential candidates, none of whom is a major political figure, have congratulated the victor.

Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid -- who came a distant second with 9% of the vote -- yesterday filed an appeal to the Constitutional Court on account of fraud. However, the Court is highly unlikely to overturn the result.

Observers from several African, Arab and Francophone international organisations have largely lauded the polls.

Majority mandate.

Abdel Aziz seized power in 2008 on the back of popular protests expressing dissatisfaction with the recently elected government. He then used state resources to seek an electoral mandate as civilian leader. Thus, the challenge for Abdel Aziz in this latest election -- particularly in the face of a boycott -- was to secure a majority turnout of registered voters:

He seems to have achieved this: provisional results indicate a 56.5% turnout of registered voters.

With 578,000 votes, he appears to have rallied support substantially since 2009, when he won 409,000 votes in a narrower majority from a 65% turnout.

However, even if the poll was entirely fair, barely two-thirds of Mauritanian adults are registered as voters.

Thus, overall, only 44% of registered voters and perhaps 30% of adult Mauritanians actually voted for Abdel Aziz. The large Afro-Mauritanian minority that predominates along the Senegalese border continues to complain of systematic disenfranchisement by Arab (Maur) elites (*see MAURITANIA: Ethnic tension colours long-term outlook - April 18, 2013*).

Strongman's success .

Abdel Aziz is not a charismatic or populist leader, nor a convincing democrat. Rather, his appeal to Mauritanian voters and political class rests on a perception of general stability and economic expansion -- without recourse to the massive repression of previous military-based governments.

Commodity prices.

Abdel Aziz's coup followed protests against the elected government's inability to curb the cost of living. Since then, in Abdel Aziz's favour, food and energy prices have been far more stable, with inflation at about 5%.

The 2009-10 surge in iron ore prices and the pre-2012 surge in gold prices markedly improved Mauritania's terms of trade and prompted ongoing multi-billion foreign investments in mining.

Despite declining offshore oil production (always minor) and stagnant metals prices, mining's share of economic output has more than doubled since 2006 and expanded state coffers. With government revenues up to 30% of GDP, the Mauritanian 'rentier' state has far more money to distribute as patronage (see *WEST AFRICA: Resources will not transform Sahel region - May 9, 2013*).

While the viability of current iron, gold and uranium projects has been undermined by falling prices, there are high expectations for new oil and gas exploration.

The military.

Abdel Aziz is the sixth (out of eight) head of state to come to power by military coup. The security sector is the most powerful institution, the largest employer, and the primary threat to his personal rule.

Yet as the former head of intelligence and the presidential guard, and veteran of several coups, Abdel Aziz has an unrivalled knowledge of loyalties and how to balance clan, regional and business interests.

The calm that surrounded the seemingly accidental shooting of the president in October 2012 and during the subsequent six weeks he spent in a Paris hospital gave a strong indication that he faced no serious challenge from within the military. However, there is longer-term concern about the rise of Islamist factions within the army.

Counterterrorism .

After a string of attacks and kidnappings by al-Qaida affiliates in 2005-09, Abdel Aziz established himself as a pillar of regional counter-jihadist activities. Mauritania's military is far larger and more capable than its Sahelian peers, making it attractive to US and French governments as a regional partner.

The president has also shown a deft touch in managing the decompression of political Islam at home, prosecuting domestic jihadists and running de-radicalisation programmes. Protecting personnel and infrastructure from terrorist attack is a significant cost to mining projects in the northern interior (see *WEST AFRICA: Region braces for potential Mali fallout - January 29, 2013*).

Tribal conservatism.

Mauritania's staunch opposition to Salafist influences is rooted in the Islamic conservatism of Maur tribal leaders who still dominate the majority rural population. Through patronage and the Senate, Abdel Aziz has their solid support and they mobilise his vote.

Foreign aid.

Since de-recognising Israel, Abdel Aziz has effectively courted Gulf Arab states and financial institutions. Aid since 2010 has helped to finance ambitious infrastructure projects -- new airports, port, energy and clean water distribution infrastructure.

Abdel Aziz has also balanced relations with rival neighbours Algeria and Morocco, which nurture factions within the army.

Islamist popularity.

Meanwhile, the opposition is divided into a myriad of factions. Established urban-based parties are increasingly irrelevant, led by ageing intellectuals unable to rally youth and anathema to the tribal sheikhs.

By contrast, urban Islamism is becoming a more dynamic force that has been effectively mobilised by Tawassoul, the local Muslim Brotherhood affiliate and the second party in parliament.

Managing urban growth and its political effects is a growing challenge as Mauritians abandon semi-nomadism for the cities. So far, Tawassoul appears to be most effective at channelling the disaffection of unemployed urban youth.

CONCLUSION: Abdel Aziz will continue to count on his winning model for managing discontent: informal patronage networks binding in Mauritania's two strong institutions, the military and rural tribal sheikhs. There is growing uncertainty over the extent to which Islamist parties will be able to capitalise on the frustrations of young, urban and unemployed populations as rural-to-urban migration undermines the sheikhs' power. However, Abdel Aziz looks secure for now.

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