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Elections in Mauritania: few certainties, many lingering questions

In September local and general elections were held in Mauritania, a preliminary test on the state of the ruling Union pour la République (UPR) party before the presidential elections next year. The elections, held in two rounds on 1 and 15 September, gave the UPR a large majority. Preliminary results from the Commission électorale nationale indépendante (CENI) after the first round suggested a victory for the UPR [*Élections en Mauritanie : la parti au pouvoir et les islamistes en tête selon les premiers résultats*, 3 September 2018, Jeune Afrique]. According to the CENI, the UPR had gained 67 seats out of 157 in the Mauritanian parliament, while the Islamist opposition party Tawassol arrived second, winning just 14 seats. The ruling party had also obtained four regional councils out of 13 and 108 municipalities out of 209 [*Élections en Mauritanie : le parti au pouvoir devance les islamistes et l'opposition*, 9 September 2018, France24]. The second round of the elections held on 15 September further confirmed UPR's political advance in the Mauritanian political landscape: President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz' party won the runoff in 22 uncontested seats, reaching 89 seats in the Assemblée Nationale, obtaining also the regional council of Nouakchott and performing relatively well in the capital's local elections [*Mauritanie : la parti au pouvoi gagne difficilement les municipales à Nouakchott*, 16 September 2018, TV5 Monde].

UPR's victory was largely expected. Opposition parties included in the Forum national pour la démocratie et l'unité (FNDU, a political coalition including Tawassol) paid their marginal position in the politics of Mauritania, a result of the decision to boycott the previous 2013 general elections. Despite the defeat, sources from Tawassol expressed satisfaction, considering the challenges posed to the UPR, in particular in Nouakchott, but also the unfavourable climate in which elections took place. Opposition parties denounced irregularities, deeming the CENI biased and hence not independent. The Coalition électorale de l'opposition démocratique (CEOD, which includes the FNDU and other opposition parties) reported

massive frauds, which were rejected not only by CENI's head Moustapha Ould Sid'El Moctar, but also by the African Union (AU). Indeed, AU's election observer mission in Mauritania, led by the former Chadian Prime Minister Albert Pahimi Padacké, ruled out massive irregularities, judging the results credible.

Despite the AU's reassurances, doubts about the credibility of the latest elections persist, given the current regime's non-compliance with international human rights standards. In August 2018 the arrest of the Birham Bah Abed, leader of the Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste (IRA), further tarnished President Abdelaziz' image [Kate Hodal, Mauritanian presidential hopeful arrested amid fears of political foul play, 9 August 2018, The Guardian]. Abed, who established the IRA in 2008 to denounce the enslavement of the Haratine or Afro-Mauritanian groups, had already been arrested many times for his anti-slavery activism. Despite authorities charging him with incitation to hate and violence, the arrest was likely linked to the elections. Abed eventually managed to win a seat despite being still held in jail.

Abelaziz' iron fist on Mauritania was also evident following the arrest of senator Mohamed Ould Ghadda. Detained since August 2017 on charges of corruption, Ghadda has been able to draw international attention on his case. On 20 June 2018 the Working Group on the Arbitrary Detention of the UN High Commissioner for the Human Rights called for the immediate release of the Mauritanian senator and an independent investigation on his arrest [Alain Faujas, *Mauritanie: la detention de l'ex-sénateur Ould Ghadda est jugée arbitraire par l'ONU*, 27 June 2018, Jeune Afrique]. Allegations against Ghadda include bribes received from the Mauritanian businessman and former head of the country's employers association Mohamed Ould Boumatou, cousin of President Abdelaziz in exile since 2010 and one of his main opponents. The funds were allegedly used by senator Ghadda to convince his colleagues to oppose the constitutional reform announced in 2016 by President Abdelaziz. The reform provided for the Senate to be abolished and replaced by regional councils, together with a new national flag and hymn. The Senate eventually rejected the reform in March 2017, in an unprecedented blow to President Abdelaziz [Louis Delatronchette, *Mauritanie : bataille constitutionnelle entre Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz et l'opposition*, 20 April 2017, Tel Quel].

However, the rejection did not stop Abdelaziz (in power since 2008 following a military coup) from implementing the reform. A referendum in August 2017 resulted in 85% of votes in favour of the proposed amendments, despite FNDU's call to boycott. The abolition of Senate and the arrest of Senator Ghadda showed the Presidency's resoluteness, something that raises many questions on Mauritania's future.

Indeed, after having been elected in 2009 and 2014, President Abdelaziz has reached the limit of two presidential mandates imposed by the Constitution. The opposition fears that the President will propose further amendments to run for a third mandate in 2019, but Abdelaziz' intents are not yet clear.

In fact in an interview with Jeune Afrique in March 2018 the President ruled out any constitutional amendment to allow him a third mandate [Justine Speigel, *Mauritanie – Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz: 'Je soutendriat un candidat en 2019'*, 5 March 2018, Jeune Afrique]. Nevertheless during the latest electoral campaign he said that an overwhelming victory for the URP could have allowed him to run again, continuing the realisation of the party's political project. Abdelaziz' ambiguity did not vanish after the URP's victory and his contradictory messages could further exacerbate tensions in the country in the weeks ahead of the April 2019 presidential elections.

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