



OCGG Security Section

Advice Program
EU Foreign, Security, and Defence Policy

Governance Area
EU Foreign Policy

After the Coup Mauritania needs EU Internationalism, not US War on Terror

Recommendation to

the European Commissioners for
External Relations and Development

the High Representative of the
Common Foreign and Security Policy

by Holger Osterrieder

THE SO-CALLED PALACE REVOLUTION

Current analysis, both inside Mauritania and outside, considers last week's coup as a purely internal affair. Most often, it is called a "palace revolution" or an internal army affair, thus implying that the coup only reflects power struggles within the Mauritanian army or even

solely between the former president Taya and his decades-long comrade, Vall, the new leader of the military council for justice and democracy. However, although such an analysis certainly has some merits, it is too short-sighted to capture the whole picture.

This paper argues that this coup clearly reflects current international politics and is as such

MAIN POINTS

The coup in Mauritania was a reaction to a failed US foreign policy driven by the war on terror. The EU should now play a greater role with its internationalist approach based on the UN and multilateralism seeking long term peace, stability, and democracy through development.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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heavily influenced by the so-called war on terror, economic and geo-strategic considerations. It shows the failure of interest-led US policy towards Mauritania. Long-term stability, peace and democracy can only be achieved through a greater role for an internationalist EU policy, based on multilateralism, strong involvement of the UN, and the honest goal to achieve human development in Mauritania. This country, at a crucial geo-strategic position between West and North Africa, can thus become a model country for successful development intervention and help to boost development in the whole of this area.

The current international scene is dominated by America's so-called war on terror and its struggle for military, political and economic predominance over the world. The US has in this context pursued a short-sighted policy towards Mauritania. This policy guided by fixed principles and the focus on fighting against a perceived Islamist terrorist threat in Mauritania without respect for and knowledge of the specific Mauritanian context, was doomed to fail and gave rise to last week's events.

THE BOOMERANG EFFECT OF THE US WAR ON TERROR - A LESSON ON HOW TO CREATE INSTABILITY

The declared goal of US policy in Mauritania was to support the Taya regime in its so-called fight against Islamists. In exchange, Taya led his country on a path of apparent pro-American policy: changing the weekend from Friday/Saturday to Saturday/Sunday, closing mosques outside hours of prayer, and incarcerating an important number of leading Islamist figures were only the most visible signs of this policy. These measures were heavily resented within the population as they were perceived as driven by US American pressure and economic considerations – without respect for traditions.

Suppression only nurtures resistance -- this conventional wisdom also holds true for Mauritania: the rise of Islamist movements, operating across borders, could easily be observed over the last few years. The opposition against Taya steadily increased. The months before the coup saw an acceleration of Islamist activities to put pressure on Taya: the attack on a military camp in the North of Mauritania in June had important repercussions on the security situation in the whole country. All

this provided the breeding ground for widespread popular hatred against Taya: seen as anti-Islamic and even a puppet of the US, the new leaders had it easy to overthrow him.

The new government's approach seems more sensible and more promising in the long-run: the liberation of some Islamists (not of those who used violence) shows a more tolerant and accommodating attitude towards the majority opinion of the population, who has had great difficulty in accepting Taya's friendly policy towards the US and Israel.

Thus, it was the US's prolongation of its international relations strategy focussing on the war of terror which ultimately contributed to the fall of Taya.

O I L I S N O T A P A N A C E A

Moreover, the US has important economic interests in the region. Oil is soon to become one of the major sources of income for the country, facing structural food insecurity and dependency on foreign aid money. Just days before the coup, promising talks took place between the Mauritanian and the American governments on the involvement of American compa-

nies in the exploitation of oil in Mauritania. The current main beneficiaries are Australian and British enterprises - and thus enterprises of "friendly" nations.

This strive for oil, without respect for sustainability and its impact on the population, also provided a rich basis for the supporters of the coup. Oil creates enormous expectations, but also fears. In the Mauritanian context, characterised by its tribal society, widespread patron-client social and economic relationships, and enormous ethnic tensions, this policy of relentless pursuit of economic interests also contributed to the fall of Taya, in two ways. Not only did the population slowly, but steadily realise that the so-long expected benefits from oil production would not come and that its impact could be rather negative on Mauritians' every-day life (the recent increase in the price of bread and the rice dish, the main food of the majority of the poor population, have been visible signs of this), but in addition the intransparency of the management of the soon-to-arrive oil money gave strong momentum to internal conflicts among the leading tribes about resource distribution -- or to put it in other words: the one in power holds the key to the treasure.

HOW TO HELP MAURITANIA ON ITS PATH TO DEMOCRACY

The military council for justice and democracy has pledged to step down in one to two years, after a transition period leading to free and fair elections and a democratic system. At first sight highly improbably to even optimistic outside observer, this scenario could nevertheless hold true. Mauritania's neighbouring country, Mali, has set the example.

But what is needed for this? International support, not in the American way of promoting one's own interests, nor à la française, but in the European internationalist way, with the support of the UN.

America's statements after the fall of Taya, demanding his immediate return, have only further intensified the already widespread hatred of American foreign policy among Mauritians.

France's approach is not the solution to the problem either. Many observers have concluded that the new military council is clearly pro-French. This holds certainly true, but may not disguise the fact that, as a former colonial power, France has strong political and economic interests in Mauritania, compromising its neutrality.

The sometimes highly dubious stances of France's African policy might suggest that France is happier with a non-democratic pro-French government than with a democratic non-pro-French government.

France may therefore run the risk to provide more or less unconditional support to the military council instead of assisting it and, if necessary, pushing it towards a path of democracy. France's first reactions in the aftermath of the coup were not very promising: unlike the rest of the world community, France did not clearly condemn the coup (and be it only for reasons of principle to show its adherence to international law) nor did it demand the return to a constitutional system. This position is a reflection of a prudent approach - the aim being not to endanger French interests, however short-sighted they might be.

What the world needs now and Mauritania in particular is the European internationalist approach - multilateralism, democracy, peace and security through development, the fulfilment of the capacities of human beings as an end to societal development - read the latest UN publications and you know what it is.

Mauritania's military council has made a clear pledge to democracy. The population has high expectations. This unique

chance may not be missed! We have to ensure that the government obtains sufficient aid to accompany it on its ambitious path. Real democracy can only be achieved when the human being fully benefits from his capacities.

MAURITANIA IS AT A REAL TURNING POINT IN ITS POSTCOLONIAL HISTORY

Let's make Mauritania an example for the whole region. With its rather small population of only 3 million people, sufficient economic resources to successfully fight poverty, and some promising human development indicators (low HIV/AIDS prevalence rate, high primary school enrolment rate, an encouraging gender power distribution), Mauritania can become a model example for what humanity has learned about development in the past fifty years.

The stage is set for immediate high-scale development assistance to Mauritania. Let's apply the findings of the UN Millennium Project not just on the level of eight African villages (yes, that is the current plan!), but let's make a whole country a model for the world! Mauritania now has to heavily invest in social services and the

basic needs of its population - not limited to food, shelter and health care, but encompassing the right to democracy. And that all those who think that development is a matter of decade-long or century-long assistance do their homework first and read the latest literature on development approaches, providing an inspiring and creative outlook on development based on concrete success stories all over the world. Quick-wins, upfront investment in cheap, but highly efficient development projects, do exist : the fight against malaria through the provision of mosquito nets to the poor, free food for school children to retain them at school, and improved access to water are measures that are very promising in the Mauritanian context and that can rapidly lead towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. And let's hold the new leaders accountable to their own promises.

But we should not forget that these efforts can only be successful in a positive international environment, dominated by international relations that are really in the interest of the Mauritanian population. The coup has shown that Mauritania is prone to instability. If it continues to be a playing ground for the international powers, it can never leave the trap of poverty. But if we use Europe's internationalist approach, it has a real chance.

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Company number: 04964367

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