

## RATIONAL CHOICE AND CONSTITUTIONAL LIMITS IN MAURITANIA: MOHAMED OULD ABDEL AZIZ'S STRATEGY AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE POLITICAL TRANSFER OF POWER

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**Abstract:** This study examines the unprecedented moment in Mauritanian history represented by the peaceful transfer of political power between former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and his successor, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, in 2019. The significance of this moment is characterized by the former president's refusal to pursue constitutional amendments to secure a third term. This move could have had negative consequences for the socio-political stability of the state. Therefore, the objectives of this paper aim to explore, on the one hand, the motivations behind President Aziz's decision to abide by constitutional provisions and, on the other hand, the resulting socio-political consequences. Structured in two parts, this paper uses the 2019 elections as a reference point for achieving the proposed objectives. The first part employs a rational choice approach, considering the costs and benefits that led the former president to transfer political power peacefully. The second part utilizes an interpretative analysis of reports from organizations such as Freedom House, the Arab Barometer, Afrobarometer, and V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) to assess the socio-political context resulting from the period 2019-2023. Additionally, this study employs a qualitative analysis of political discourse and media coverage. Finally, the findings suggest the establishment of a precedent that, if followed, could bring significant benefits to the country's political stability and social development.

**Keywords:** 2019 elections; Constitution; Mauritania; political power transfer; socio-political stability

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### INTRODUCTION

The issue of power transitions in authoritarian or hybrid regimes has, in recent decades, become a major topic of interest in the literature of political science and contemporary history. Mauritania fits within this analytical

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framework through its specific characteristics—a state marked by coups d'état, institutional fragility, and persistent social tensions. The peaceful transfer of power in 2019 represents a notable exception in the regional<sup>1</sup> political landscape.

More precisely, in 2019, a wave of revolts similar to that of 2011 swept across the region, producing a series of notable changes. In Algeria, the protest movement that erupted at the beginning of 2019 led to the replacement of the former dictator, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, with a new leader, elected in the same year through *sham elections*. In Sudan, protests that broke out at the end of 2018, triggered by the “government decision to end wheat and fuel subsidies, at the recommendation of the IMF, amid longstanding financial troubles including spiraling inflation and currency chaos,”<sup>2</sup> resulted in the removal of former dictator Omar al-Bashir from power through a coup d'état the following year. Moreover, in both Lebanon and Iraq, the protests led to the resignation of Prime Ministers Saad Hariri and Adel Abdul Mahdi, respectively.

Also, 2019 is the year in which Kais Saied was elected President of Tunisia. Although he came to power democratically, this moment proved to be defining for the conclusion of the Tunisian democratic experiment, culminating in 2022 with the replacement of the 2014 Constitution and the establishment of a “hyper-presidential” regime, as described by authors such as Monica Marks and Hatem Nafti. As can be seen from the examples presented above, although the MENA states were engulfed in a new wave of revolts during 2019, similar to that of 2011, the outcomes did not lead to the establishment of democratic regimes. On the contrary, regimes seemed better prepared to respond to political and social instability either by changing the leader or by introducing constitutional measures justified as being in the interest of the population. This new type of development is presented as a warning signal by authors such as Anna Lührmann and Staffan Lindberg, who refer in the specialized literature to “a third wave of autocratization.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The reference is made to the MENA region, which includes, according to the definition used by the author, all Arab states in the Arab League: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

<sup>2</sup> “12 defining moments in Sudan’s 12-month uprising,” Al-Jazeera, December 18, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/18/12-defining-moments-in-sudans-12-month-uprising/>.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, “Keeping the Democratic Façade: Contemporary Autocratization as a Game of Deception,” *The Varieties of Democracy Institute*, no. 75, (August 2018): 4, [https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/handle/2077/57397/gupea\\_2077\\_57397\\_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/handle/2077/57397/gupea_2077_57397_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

This study, therefore, relates to a broader context of debates on institutional resilience, the strategic calculations of elites, and the international impact of political change, contributing to understanding how the precedent set by Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz fits into the regional and global dynamics of hybrid regimes.

The year 2019 marked an unprecedented moment in Mauritanian history, attributed to the peaceful transfer of political power from former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz to the current head of state, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. The uniqueness of this event is primarily characterized by two distinctive elements of former political leader Mohamed Aziz. The first factor pertains to how he ultimately assumed state leadership in 2009, following the ousting of former President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi from power one year prior.

Specifically, Aziz orchestrated not one, but two successful coups in 2005 and 2008. The first coup ended approximately two decades of dictatorship under President Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, marking the beginning of a promising transition process. However, the next coup in 2008 faced severe criticism from both domestic political adversaries and the international community on the global stage. The second element is that Mohamed Aziz is the only president of the country who faced and chose to respect the limit of two presidential terms. This limit was introduced only in 2006 through a constitutional referendum during the leadership of Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, two years before the 2008 coup.

Therefore, the decision of the former head of state to abide by the constitution raises several questions that I will attempt to address throughout this paper: how did we reach the moment of this power transfer in 2019, what are the consequences on the socio-political system in Mauritania, and why did Mohamed Aziz not amend the constitution to secure a third presidential term? From these questions stem the main objectives of this paper, which involve uncovering the motivations behind Mohamed Aziz's decision and analyzing the consequences that unfolded in the political and social environment after Mohamed Ghazouani assumed power.

To achieve these objectives, the period considered in the structure of the paper is from 2009 to 2023. For this paper, the year 2019 represents a watershed moment between the events that occurred during the former president's tenure and the new developments on the internal political stage of Mauritania during the current president's term.

Considering Mauritania's tumultuous history, it is challenging to believe that the former president was willing to relinquish all political power for an altruistic transfer of authority intended to benefit the country's internal situation. Rather, this event seems to be the result of a decision made against the backdrop of ongoing conflict between the former president and the

opposition, fueled primarily by his statements and decisions. Among the statements that sparked a wave of criticism against him are those from 2016, where he stated: "I am neither ashamed nor afraid of asking to change the constitution for my personal interest. But I don't think this would be in the interest of the country"<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, to understand the motivations behind the former president's decision to abide by constitutional provisions, I propose an analysis based on the rational choice model to uncover the benefits, costs, and risks that Mohamed Aziz had to consider in making this decision. According to this approach, "actors' behavior is based on comparative analyses, which integrate their own criteria, to determine the costs and benefits associated with the different options"<sup>5</sup>.

This approach involves two steps: selecting the most feasible alternatives and then choosing the preferred option<sup>6</sup> based on constraints and opportunities. Political discourse is therefore essential for understanding how actors justify their choices. Far from being mere rhetoric, discourse functions as a strategic tool to achieve objectives. It complements rather than contradicts rational choice, offering a fuller account of how political actors implement and legitimize their decisions.

Thus, in this paper, I not only consider the motives of the former president but also the options available to him, each analyzed based on the benefits, costs, or risks involved. In this instance, it can be asserted that Mohamed Aziz systematically categorized the various possible actions, and proceeded with the course of action that maximized utility, given the available information and associated risks. In other words, the achievement of the proposed objectives depends on certain conditions that may or may not be controlled by the rational actor involved.

Furthermore, the resources and strategies available to the actor in achieving the proposed objectives may encounter obstacles, rendering success in overcoming these challenges not always guaranteed. A conclusive example could be the opposition's boycott of parliamentary and presidential elections in 2013, 2014, and again in 2018 or the need for Mohamed Aziz to organize a referendum in 2017 following the failure to see his reforms adopted in parliament. Although the adopted changes did not include the introduction of a third presidential term, this initiative sparked harsh reactions from opposition

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<sup>4</sup> Kissima Diagana, "Mauritanian president says has no plans to scrap term limits," Reuters, October 21, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN12L1XI/>.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Frédéric Morin and Jonathan Paquin, *Foreign Policy Analysis: A Toolbox*, (Gowerbestrasse: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 226-227.

<sup>6</sup> Jan de Jonge, *Rethinking Rational Choice Theory: A Companion on Rational and Moral Action*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 8.

parties towards the implemented measures and fueled suspicions regarding the "true" intentions of the president.

Regarding the assessment of Mauritania's democratic progress, the paper employs Freedom House indicators as well as data from Afrobarometer and Arab Barometer surveys. These indicators are relevant as they capture dimensions such as civil liberties, institutional performance, and public perceptions of the political regime. Accordingly, the methodology combines the analysis of international indicators with their contextualization through primary and secondary sources on Mauritania's internal developments.

The research methodology combines a theoretical analysis based on the rational choice model with the interpretation of primary and secondary sources concerning the Mauritanian political context. Data from reports produced by Freedom House, Afrobarometer, Arab Barometer, and V-Dem are used to measure levels of civil liberties, political participation, and the quality of democratic institutions. These data have been correlated with political discourse and media coverage of events to capture both the normative and discursive dimensions of Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz's decision.

Finally, I need to assess the consequences of the former president's decision to transfer political power. Although this was not a risk-free choice, it guaranteed him the greatest benefits. In this way, Mohamed Aziz established both a much-needed precedent for the political and social stability of the country and an alternative route that would have allowed him to remain present on the political scene of Mauritania. However, both outcomes must be viewed with caution, especially when current internal developments contradict the expected benefits anticipated by the former president.

### **MOHAMED OULD ABDEL AZIZ AND A THIRD TERM: WHY DID IT NOT OCCUR?**

For a better understanding of the options available to a head of state when seeking a third term, it is necessary to take a broader look at other academic papers that have addressed this subject. According to authors such as Denis M. Tull and Claudia Simons, "nearly every second incumbent in Africa is not prepared to respect his country's constitutional term limits"<sup>7</sup>. This statement, which practically encapsulates the situation of African states from 2005 onwards, "suggests that obstacles to amending constitutions are relatively easy to surmount, whereas the costs of political-legal engineering are low compared with the envisioned return"<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Denis M. Tull and Claudia Simons, "The Institutionalisation of Power Revisited: Presidential Term Limits in Africa", *Africa Spectrum*, vol. 52, no. 2 (August 2017): 85, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/000203971705200204>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

As a result, I can assert that, generally, a head of state who desires to continue exercising political power despite constitutional provisions has at his disposal a series of means that he can use to achieve his goal. Among the most commonly encountered options are those listed by Mila Versteeg et al., which include "amending or changing the constitution so that the two-term limit is removed, finding a faithful agent replacement leader whom the incumbent can control after he is out of office, and delaying elections by citing some form of political instability"<sup>9</sup>. These appear to be the most frequently used means by heads of state to ensure their political continuity. However, these are certainly not the only methods encountered. In this case, the same authors also mention other examples, less common, where several "incumbents have relied on their courts to interpret constitutional term limits out of the constitution"<sup>10</sup>.

In recent years, the specialized literature on processes of autocratization, authoritarian deepening, or democratic backsliding has emphasized a new mode of dismantling democracy, distinct from the traditional coup d'état—namely through subversion, erosion, or executive aggrandizement. A wide range of international scholars, including Ellen Lust, Nancy Bermeo, Steven Levitsky, Aurel Croissant, Milan Svolik, Adam Przeworski, Johannes Gerschewski, and Stephan Haggard, have drawn attention to these dynamics. Although Mauritania cannot be characterized as a democracy, it is important to note that such methods have been employed by political leaders (strongmen) to gradually consolidate power, often by amending or even rewriting constitutions in their own interest—illustrating what Kim Scheppele has termed "autocratic legalism"<sup>11</sup>.

Having specified the main options available to heads of state seeking to remain in power despite constitutional provisions, I now proceed to apply these options to the case of Mauritania, using the rational choice model. Mauritania represents a rare example on the African continent, with Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz being the first president of the country to comply with the two-term limit. Building on the options outlined above, I aim to conduct a cost-benefit analysis to elucidate the motives and objectives of the former president, drawing on his public statements from 2009 up to the transfer of power in 2019.

Therefore, the internal situation of Mauritania prior to 2019 is clearly outlined by authors such as Raquel Ojeda García, who analyzes the political system, and Boubacar N'Diaye and Noel Foster, who examine the country's

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<sup>9</sup> Mila Versteeg et al., "The law and politics of presidential term limit evasion," *Columbia Law Review*, vol. 120, no. 1 (January 2020): 174, <https://columbialawreview.org/content/the-law-and-politics-of-presidential-term-limit-evasion/>.

<sup>10</sup> Versteeg et al., "The law and politics of presidential term limit evasion".

<sup>11</sup> Kim Lane Scheppele, "Autocratic Legalism," *The University of Chicago Law Review*, <https://lawreview.uchicago.edu/print-archive/autocratic-legalism>.

socio-economic development and the evolution of its military apparatus. An important contribution is also provided by Rainer Grote and Tilmann J. Roder, who state that "It seems to be a peculiarity of the politics in Mauritania that the chief of the armed forces first gains power in a coup and subsequently consolidates his power through the electoral process"<sup>12</sup>. In other words, the crisis caused by the coup d'état in 2008 continued to affect the internal politics of Mauritania in the following years. A first step towards resolving this crisis was taken through the implementation of the provisions of the Dakar Framework Agreement in 2009, in which "the three major poles of political life in Mauritania agreed on an organized transition in a consensual manner. Thus, the military junta, the National Front for the Defense of Democracy (FNDD)<sup>13</sup>, and the Assembly of Democratic Forces (RFD) committed to jointly engage in the transition process by participating in the elections scheduled for that year, in the Transitional Government of National Union, and the establishment of the Independent National Electoral Commission"<sup>14</sup>.

The subsequent elections that year and his victory in the first round with 52% of the vote appear to have granted him the desired legitimacy, as evidenced by the statements of the Minister of the Interior: "I affirm here that I have not received any complaint or appeal calling into question the sincerity of the vote despite information which has reached us on the publication by four candidates (from the opposition) of a press release contesting the results of the vote"<sup>15</sup>. However, the results only served to further increase the existing tensions between the new president and members of the opposition, the latter qualifying the elections as an "electoral masquerade which seeks to legitimize the coup d'état of August 6, 2008"<sup>16</sup>.

Even during his electoral campaign, Mohamed Aziz's statements continued to exacerbate the distrust among opposition members regarding the fairness of the electoral process, as he asserted "I am sure, we will pass in the first round. It will be the victory of the entire Mauritania, of the Mauritanian

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<sup>12</sup> Rainer Grote, Tilmann J. Roder, "Constitutionalism in Islamic Countries Between Upheaval and Continuity," (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 256.

<sup>13</sup> This was replaced in December 2009 by the new opposition group Coordination of the Forces of the Democratic Opposition (CFOD, then COD), which brought together 9 political parties.

<sup>14</sup> Accord Cadre De Dakar Entre Les Trois Grands Poles Politiques Mauritaniens, June 2009, [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MR\\_090603\\_Accord%20Cadre%20de%20Dakar%20entre%20les%203%20grands%20poles%20politiques%20mauritaniens.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MR_090603_Accord%20Cadre%20de%20Dakar%20entre%20les%203%20grands%20poles%20politiques%20mauritaniens.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> "L'opposition conteste la victoire du général Ould Abdel Aziz," France 24, July 2009, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20090719-lopposition-conteste-victoire-general-ould-abdel-aziz->.

<sup>16</sup> "L'opposition conteste la victoire du général Ould Abdel Aziz".

people"<sup>17</sup>. Thus, despite accusations from other presidential candidates, the newly elected President Mohamed Aziz continued to uphold the fairness of the elections and emphasize the beneficial role his election would have on Mauritania's internal situation as is evident from his statements: "My victory is a victory against poverty, misery, disease, ignorance... I do not feel targeted by these accusations, our camp has not committed acts of fraud!" and "These elections have been judged to be free, transparent, and democratic"<sup>18</sup>.

In fact, Mohamed Aziz's political trajectory, at least during his first term, is highly pragmatic. On the one hand, he sought to justify his coup by discrediting the ousted president, Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, and, on the other hand, to legitimize and consolidate his position as the new leader of the state. In this regard, Mohamed Aziz supported his coup by highlighting the former president's inability to ensure the country's security, which was severely challenged by "drug trafficking and violent acts linked to Muslim radicalism"<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, to legitimize himself domestically in the eyes of voters, his electoral campaign relied on a discourse promoting him as "a new man, the anti-system candidate, the candidate of the poor people, or the champion of the fight against bad governance"<sup>20</sup>.

Thus, the first years of leadership represent a period of attempting to legitimize the coup and consolidate political power, as General Aziz entered the electoral race after "resigning from his positions as head of state and giving up his status as an active-duty military officer"<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, since winning the elections was not enough to garner the support of the opposition or the international community, Mohamed Aziz continued to partially adhere to the provisions of the Dakar Framework Agreement by organizing a national inclusive dialogue<sup>22</sup> in 2011, resulting in the parties agreeing to adopt modest constitutional and institutional changes that involved "cultural diversity, the

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<sup>17</sup> AFP, "Ould Abdel Aziz assuré de sa victoire," *Jeune Afrique*, July 2009, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/159141/politique/ould-abdel-aziz-assur-de-sa-victoire/>.

<sup>18</sup> "Le général a gagné," RFI, July 2009, [http://www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/115/article\\_82855.asp](http://www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/115/article_82855.asp).

<sup>19</sup> Alain Antil, "Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz l'alchimiste," *L'Année du Maghreb* [Online], (June 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4000/anneemaghreb.921>.

<sup>20</sup> Antil, "Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz".

<sup>21</sup> Ahmed Salem Ould Bouboutt, "La revision constitutionnelle du 20 mars 2012 en Mauritanie," *L'Année du Maghreb* [Online], (October 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4000/anneemaghreb.1982>.

<sup>22</sup> At the dialogue, both the presidential authority and opposition parties, such as the Progressive Popular Alliance, El Wiam, Hamam, and Sawab, while the Rally of Democratic Forces, the Union of Progressive Forces, and the Tewassoul Party, organized within the Coordination of the Democratic Opposition (COD), refused to participate.

prohibition of slavery, the prohibition of coups, promoting women's access to elected positions, and preserving the environment"<sup>23</sup>

It can be observed, therefore, from the president's statements and actions during his first term, that his discourse is confident in his own abilities and even defiant towards accusations from opposition parties. However, a change occurs during his second term from 2014 to 2019. Specifically, the situation changed in 2017 with the failure to adopt the desired reforms through parliamentary procedure, as they were rejected in the Senate. Although the party Union for the Republic (UPR) founded by Mohamed Aziz in 2009 held the majority in parliament, this was insufficient to adopt the implementation of the constitutional changes desired by him. This represents the first instance in which the former president faced a political setback, realizing both the risks involved in the constitutional amendment process and the need to resort to alternative means to enforce his reforms.

The alternative came directly from the Constitution, more precisely from Article 38, which specifies that "The President of the Republic can, on any question of national importance, refer the people to [a matter] by way of referendum"<sup>24</sup>. Hence, President Mohamed Aziz was ultimately able to enact reforms which, while not explicitly including the introduction of a third term, encompassed measures such as „altering the flag, dissolving the Senate, implementing regionalization, and restructuring various constitutional institutions"<sup>25</sup>. However, the initiation of the referendum was viewed as a menace by the opposition, who feared it „could pave the way for further constitutional changes to extend presidential powers and remove term limits"<sup>26</sup>.

Therefore, the year 2017, or rather the failure to adopt constitutional amendments through parliamentary procedure, served as a wake-up call for Mohamed Aziz. Starting the following year, President Aziz categorically rejected constitutional changes made in his own interest, stating in an interview with *Jeune Afrique*: "I respect the Constitution, which limits the number of presidential terms to two. Certainly, I have revised the Constitution, but I have never touched this article. And I will not touch it"<sup>27</sup>. Instead, he suggested that

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<sup>23</sup> Bouboutt, "La revision constitutionnelle du 20 mars 2012".

<sup>24</sup> "Mauritania Constitution," 2012, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Mauritania\\_2012](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Mauritania_2012).

<sup>25</sup> Ahmed Salem Ould Bouboutt, "La Constitution mauritanienne, toujours recommencee!," *Revue Francaise de Droit Constitutionnel*, no. 113, (2018), <https://www.cairn.info/revue-francaise-de-droit-constitutionnel-2018-1-page-75.htm?ref=doi>.

<sup>26</sup> "Mauritania – 2018 Elections – Parliament," 2018, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/africa/mr-politics-2018.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Justine Spiegel, "Mauritanie – Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz: << Je soutiendrai un candidat en 2019 >>," *Jeune Afrique*, March 5, 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/536536/politique/mauritanie-mohamed-ould-abdelaziz-je-soutiendrai-un-candidat-en-2019/>.

he supports the transfer of power to a successor without excluding his own participation in political life: "Nothing in the Constitution prevents me from running again in the future. A president does not have the right to run for a third term, but when I leave the presidency, I will no longer be president"<sup>28</sup>.

Therefore, considering his political statements, it can be affirmed that out of the general options mentioned at the beginning of the paper, only two are usually present in his discourse in one form or another: constitutional amendment and power transfer. The former is contested, while the latter is not; the former involves immense risks to the internal stability of the country, while the latter allows him to continue exercising influence over Mauritanian political life, even if not from the position of president.

Thus, the option that could offer him the greatest benefits remained the transfer of power to a trusted individual, Mohamed Ghazouani fitting this profile given the close relationship between them. In practice, supporting Mohamed Ghazouani for the presidency offered Mohamed Aziz the opportunity to retain and exercise a significant degree of political influence and, at the same time, the possibility of participating in future elections in 2024, as indicated by his statements.

## **THE TRANSFER OF POLITICAL POWER IN 2019 AND ITS CONSEQUENCES**

According to the official statements of competent political authorities, Mauritania is considered to be a "pluralist democracy"<sup>29</sup> in which the Union for the Republic (UPR), renamed El Insaf in 2022, represents the dominant political formation in the country. However, reports from international organizations that analyze the democratic evolution of states worldwide, such as the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit for the year 2023, present Mauritania's internal situation as that of a "hybrid regime,"<sup>30</sup> representing a rather modest improvement compared to the former authoritarian regime of Mohamed Aziz. Nevertheless, Mauritania continues to lag behind neighboring or territorially proximate states such as Morocco and Tunisia in terms of democracy, recording a percentage of only 4.14% on a scale from 0 to 10.

Therefore, although the situation of the five categories analyzed in the Democracy Index — electoral process and pluralism, functioning of

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<sup>28</sup> Paulina Zidi, "Mauritanie: le président Aziz n'exclut pas une future candidature présidentielle," RFI, June 21, 2019, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20190621-mauritanie-president-aziz-exclut-pas-une-prochaine-candidature-presidentielle>.

<sup>29</sup> "Mauritanie," Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, de la Coopération et des Mauritaniens de l'Extérieur, 2022, <https://www.diplomatie.gov.mr/fr/mauritanie>.

<sup>30</sup> "Democracy Index 2023 Age of Conflict," EIU report, 2023, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/>.

government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties — has modestly improved since the current president took office in 2019, the recorded democratic level remains below the global average of approximately 5%. Even more concerning is the fact that the democratic level recorded during Ghazouani's presidency is even lower than that of the years 2011-2014 during Aziz's regime when the country scored 4.17% against the backdrop of inclusive national dialogue and the adoption of normative and institutional constitutional amendments.

Thus, to understand the concrete consequences of the power transfer in 2019 on the socio-political situation in Mauritania, I intend to analyze reports from international organizations closely monitoring developments at the internal level of this country. Accordingly, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani became the new president of Mauritania following the 2019 elections, obtaining a score of 52%, but the result was harshly criticized by the opposition considering the close relationship between the former and current presidents of the country. Specifically, their shared history is marked by their joint participation in the 2005 coup d'état and their leadership of another coup in 2008, which brought Mohamed Aziz to power. Also, Ghazouani was Aziz's military chief of staff for ten years. Then defense minister for several months,<sup>31</sup> explaining the support from the former president for Mohamed Ghazouani in the electoral race.

With the assumption of power in 2019 by the current president, the country's internal situation seems to have modestly improved starting in 2020, when Mauritania, according to Freedom House, was classified as Partly Free with a score of 34/100, compared to the previous year when the score was 32/100, placing it in the Not Free category<sup>32</sup>. This result is attributed to the power transfer in 2019, which occurred through a "relatively credible presidential election"<sup>33</sup>. However, two of Mauritania's main problems, discrimination and slavery, continue to be challenging to manage, with authorities taking measures to combat them on one hand while continuing to arrest anti-discrimination and anti-slavery activists on the other.

The following years can be characterized more as a period of stagnation in terms of political rights and civil liberties, with Mauritania remaining in the Partly Free category, obtaining the same score of 35/100 for the years 2021-2022, with a slight increase of only one point in 2023. Additionally, this period is characterized by significant developments domestically, with 2021 being problematic for the former president, who "was charged with corruption,

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<sup>31</sup> "Continuity and challenges for Mauritania's new president, Political and Economic Risk Monitoring," July 2019, [https://www.controlrisks.com/our-thinking/insights/continuity-and-challenges-for-mauritania-new-president?utm\\_referrer=https://www.bing.com](https://www.controlrisks.com/our-thinking/insights/continuity-and-challenges-for-mauritania-new-president?utm_referrer=https://www.bing.com).

<sup>32</sup> "Mauritania," Freedom House, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/mauritania/freedom-world/2020>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

money laundering, and misappropriation of public funds. He had been under house arrest since August 2020 and was taken into custody in June 2021 for noncompliance with his house arrest requirements"<sup>34</sup>.

In this context, a new approach by President Ghazouani regarding the consolidation of political power can be observed, particularly through the ruling party, El Insaf, which secured a comfortable victory in the 2023 legislative and local elections<sup>35</sup>. On the other hand, he resorted to countering the influence and ambitions of the former president, "placing the ruling party in charge of launching a far-reaching and surprisingly efficient investigation of Mohamed Aziz's activities during his ten years in office"<sup>36</sup>. This result is not surprising, considering the increasingly tense relationship between the two heads of state, which began to deteriorate in the early months after Ghazouani assumed the presidential mandate in 2019. Disagreements between the two regarding the leadership of the UPR party<sup>37</sup> ultimately led to a rift between them, manifested not only by the arrest and investigation of the former president but also by the renaming of the party to El Insaf, a rather symbolic gesture intended to demonstrate the ambitions and control exercised by the current head of state.

Thus, in the following years, Mohamed Ghazouani continued to take measures to ensure the stability and security of the country. An example of this is the launch of the Priority Program on January 29, 2020, whose priorities focus on „improving purchasing power, creating employment, and ensuring access to basic services"<sup>38</sup>.

However, the first term of President Ghazouani can be characterized more as a period of stagnation, especially in areas such as political rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law, where the index presented by the Varieties of Democracy did not show any significant changes. However, it should be noted that the values reported in the Electoral or Liberal Democracy Index, for example, appear to be slowly entering a downward trend, reaching a worrisome low compared to previous years. This may indicate that as the current president consolidates his power, the regime is becoming increasingly repressive, moving more toward autocratization rather than democratization.

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<sup>34</sup> "Mauritania," Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/mauritania/freedom-world/2022>.

<sup>35</sup> "Mauritania's ruling party wins majority seats in local and legislative polls," *Africa News*, August 13, 2024, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/05/22/mauritanias-ruling-party-wins-majority-seats-in-local-and-legislative-polls/>.

<sup>36</sup> "Mauritania," BTI 2022 Country Report, 2022, [https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country\\_report\\_2022\\_MRT.pdf](https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2022_MRT.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Camille Evrard and Erin Pettigrew, "Chronologie Mauritanie 2019," *L'Année du Maghreb* [Online], no. 23, (December 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4000/anneemaghreb.6762>.

<sup>38</sup> "Programme Prioritaire Elargi du Président," 2020, [https://finances.gov.mr/sites/default/files/2021-12/propep\\_ver\\_def\\_15h\\_00\\_01\\_09\\_2020.pdf](https://finances.gov.mr/sites/default/files/2021-12/propep_ver_def_15h_00_01_09_2020.pdf)

Regarding the consequences of the power transfer on the social factor, it can be stated that even at this level, the current president did not achieve beneficial results, at least during his first term. In fact, a large part of the population remains skeptical about the measures implemented by Mohamed Ghazouani, and this situation remains a legacy of the former regime. Specifically, in a survey conducted in 2019, a percentage of "64% lack confidence in the honesty of elections"<sup>39</sup>. However, the majority of the population continues to support Mauritania's advancement towards democracy<sup>40</sup>.

Thus, according to the results of the Arab Barometer published in 2022, the majority of the population in Mauritania is aware of the economic benefits that democracy can bring, with only 42% agreeing with the statement that "economic performance is poor under a democratic system,"<sup>41</sup> placing it in a somewhat better position than countries like Tunisia or Morocco. Likewise, the statement that "democratic regimes are indecisive and full of problems,"<sup>42</sup> seems to be shared by 42% of the population, placing it in a better position than Tunisia and Libya. The same applies to the perception, quite widespread among Arab states, that "democracies are not effective at maintaining order and stability,"<sup>43</sup> a view shared by only 38% of the population in Mauritania.

Therefore, the benefits of a democratic regime are generally known and accepted in the case of Mauritania, with 76% of the country's population agreeing that "democratic systems are better than other systems," while 57% agree that "democracy is always preferable to any other type of government"<sup>44</sup>.

In the Afrobarometer results for Mauritania in 2023, under the category of democracy and politics, the country was perceived by 32.6% of respondents (at the end of 2022) as "a democracy with minor issues"<sup>45</sup>. However, an interesting aspect of this view of Mauritania is that the rural respondents, in particular, perceives the country as a "full democracy" at a rate of 31.2%.

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<sup>39</sup> Magali Rheault and RJ Reinhart, "Mauritanians' Confidence Crisis Before Election," GALLUP, June 21, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/259055/mauritani-ans-confidence-crisis-election.aspx>.

<sup>40</sup> A notable work that analyzes the meaning of democracy in Arab states as distinct from its Western interpretation is Hannah M. Ridge's *Defining Democracy: Democratic Commitment in the Arab World*.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Robbins, "Democracy in the Middle East & North Africa," *Arab Barometer*, (July 2022): 3, [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_Governance\\_Report-EN-1.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Governance_Report-EN-1.pdf).

<sup>42</sup> Robbins, "Democracy in the Middle East & North Africa".

<sup>43</sup> Robbins, "Democracy in the Middle East & North Africa," 5.

<sup>44</sup> Robbins, "Democracy in the Middle East & North Africa," 11.

<sup>45</sup> Afrobarometer, "Résumé des résultats, Enquête d'Afrobarometer Round 9 en Mauritanie," 2023, 27, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Resume-des-resultats-Mauritanie-Afrobarometer-R9-SOR-18oct23.pdf>.

Regarding the satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in Mauritania, 37.6% of citizens responded that they are fairly satisfied. A thought-provoking aspect relates to how citizens perceive democracy in 2022 compared to five years ago, with the majority, 53.6%, believing that the situation has remained unchanged. Similarly, the data regarding the future of democracy in Mauritania over the next five years show that 54.9% of respondents believe the situation will generally remain the same. These data are particularly interesting as they indicate that citizens' expectations for President Ghazouani's second term are rather pessimistic regarding his achievements.

In the category of freedoms, 54.5% of respondents consider themselves free to express their opinions. The results are equally encouraging regarding the freedom to join a political organization of their choice, with 56.5%, and the freedom to vote without pressure, with 61.9%. In the category of citizenship and participation, the results are rather discouraging, with 53.7% of respondents stating that they do not feel close to or represented by any political party, while of the 44.8% who stated the contrary, 28.5% trust the El Insaf party, which is significantly ahead of the next ranked party, Tawassoul, with only 4.3%. The results in the rule of law category are not more encouraging. Generally, respondents believe that the president often ignores the courts and the country's laws (40.2%) and the National Assembly (30.6%). Additionally, regarding crimes committed by officials, 34% believe that these often go unpunished, unlike ordinary people who are never left unpunished. In the elections category, 40.2% of respondents believe that political competition often leads to violent conflicts. Despite this, in the last presidential elections in 2019, 66.4% of respondents stated that they voted, with 31.9% believing that the elections were free and transparent, presenting only minor issues.

From these results, the expectations of the Mauritanian population regarding political authorities and the distrust expressed towards their decisions become evident as stated by the International Monetary Fund report for 2022, which states that "Mauritania exhibits a relatively high burden from government regulation, low quality of governance, and scarce access to financial services"<sup>46</sup>. A case worth mentioning in this context is that of Oumar Diop, who died in 2023 "after being held in custody in a police station, which caused major riots in the country"<sup>47</sup> (RFI 2023). In this case, a complementary analysis conducted in Morocco was necessary for the victim's family to finally accept the version

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<sup>46</sup> "Mauritania Country Report," BTI, 2024, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MRT#pos8>.

<sup>47</sup> "Mauritanie: Oumar Diop inhumé à Nouakchott après les conclusions de l'autopsie marocaine," RFI, June 11, 2023, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230610-mauritanie-oumar-diop-inhum%C3%A9-%C3%A0-nouakchott-apr%C3%A8s-les-conclusions-de-l-autopsie-marocaine>.

presented by the Mauritanian Ministry of the Interior, which stated that Oumar Diop did not die due to the authorities' fault.

### CONCLUSION

Therefore, the political power transfer of 2019 can be seen more as a well-thought-out calculation from a cost-benefit perspective, with outcomes anticipated by the former president but difficult to achieve considering the obstacles that stood in the way of his ambitions. However, despite the negative consequences that befell Mohamed Aziz, the decision to voluntarily relinquish leadership of the country has set a precedent that can only be beneficial for Mauritania's future.

Nevertheless, the corruption case faced by the former president represents a risky situation for the current regime as well because "it could, and still can, undermine the position of current officeholders, including the current president, given that almost all of them served the former president"<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, the precedent set by Mohamed Aziz should still be viewed with some caution considering the negative consequences he experienced. It is hard to believe that the current president will allow himself to face the same fate. This situation leaves room for future research directions on the political system of Mauritania and possible scenarios in which the country can continue its path towards democracy or, on the contrary, revert to where it started.

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<sup>48</sup> "Country Report Mauritania," BTI, 2022, [https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country\\_report\\_2022\\_MRT.pdf](https://bti-project.org/fileadmin/api/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2022_MRT.pdf).