

# The faded star of President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz

**Alain ANTIL**

The Mauritanian President, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, was elected in 2009. The architect of two successful coups: in 2005 against President Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, and in 2008 against President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, nowadays he is in his second and last term of office according to the Mauritanian constitution. He is viewed by the country's partners as one of the key figures in the stability of the Sahel. However, the international community does not see, or pretends not to see, the weakening of his regime.

The harsh question of a post-second term of office arises for him; an issue which is shaping Mauritanian political life. Capitalising on his "security succes", the president has been able to make the international community accept his coup in 2008 against a president elected a year earlier and who he was however largely instrumental in installing as head of state. Behind the image of a president who is the "strong link in the Sahel", some governance mistakes are starting to bear bitter fruit. We will concentrate on his economic governance in particular, after having tried to envisage post-second term scenarios.

## The issue of a third term

At the end of March 2016, during a press conference in Nouakchott, one of the ministers stated that the president could reconsider his idea<sup>1</sup> of not standing for election in 2019 if he felt that a majority of Mauritanians wanted this<sup>2</sup>. This sound has slowly made its way into the Mauritanian political arena. Members of the presidential party (the Union for the Republic) have been making such statements regularly since early 2015, which have been half-heartedly denied by the presidency. The issue of a third term is regularly raised by the opposition as one of the many abuses of that power.

The issue of a third term has become the disease of young democracies

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and semi-authoritarian regimes south of the Sahara wishing to return to the framework of good governance. Indeed, if formerly presidents blithely added terms without – to borrow Amadou Kourouma's phrase – "batting an eyelid throughout Africa", nowadays the international community and its continental and regional versions condemn it... However, these reproaches have variable effects depending on the countries and regions involved, as is shown by the situation in the Central African countries, where leaders have the highest average term in office in the world.

According to the Mauritanian president's contacts<sup>3</sup>, in private he has stated a wish to leave power "properly" or at the end of his second term of office. However, many analysts think that once he has become a private citizen again, the law could hold him to account, in particular accountable for the inappropriate combination of politics and economics during his two terms. The prospect of legal proceedings, embarrassing revelations, property seizure, or even exile, combined with friendly pressure from his supporters and cronies are arguments capable of shaking the firmest convictions. So, several paths are available for him to negotiate this challenging deadline:

- ▀ a **shift in strategy** which would allow him to add a few years to the presidency. He may invoke a failed civil society, whose essential review would postpone electoral deadlines or even trigger an "inclusive" dialogue prior to the electoral process, so that the opposition party, which is currently "boycotting talks", joins the process.
- ▀ a **constitutional amendment** which would remove the term limits. This option is certainly the most likely, especially as it could be accompanied by concessions to the opposite camp, like lifting the age limit for standing for presidential elections, which affects some big names in the current opposition.
- ▀ the **Egyptian scenario**, in which greater political and economic influence would be given to the army. An institution able to impose a certain number of red lines on Abdel Aziz's successors, on the new executive, including definite legal security for the outgoing president.
- ▀ the **weak man scenario**, in which a man under his control

(who the current president may have a "file" on or a specific hold over) would replace him as head of state. An unfortunate precedent which was already explored when at the end of the transition from 2005-2007, Abdel Aziz put Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi in power, who once elected quickly became uncontrollable, forcing Abdel Aziz to lead a putsch against his own protégé a year later.

▀ the **Russian scenario**, in which Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz would be installed as prime minister. Then, he would be a "strong" prime minister dealing with a weak president like during the Fourth French Republic.

▀ The last scenario, now obsolete, was that of **dynastic succession**. Moreover, some people interpreted the creation of his son, Ahmedou Ould Abdel Aziz's richly endowed foundation (Rahmaa Foundation), which has been working in the social field for the last two years, as a political springboard for the latter. Unfortunately, his son died in a road accident at the end of 2015. The profile of his other son, Badr, does not presuppose a succession, as among other misdemeanours, the latter has particularly distinguished himself by shooting point blank at a woman.

Since independence, one single head of state has left power voluntarily, which was Ely Ould Mohamed Vall<sup>4</sup> in 2007 at the end of a transition that he led. All the other heads of state were driven from power by a coup. The different assumptions mentioned are not mutually exclusive and some can be combined instead.

### **The president's tarnished image: behind the general, the difficult planner**

His best asset, vis-à-vis Mauritanian public opinion like with his supporters in the international community, is to embody the man who upgraded the Mauritanian army, both by providing it with new resources, but also through its professionalism, as marked by the opening of a national military academy and a war college. This sudden burst of security has meant that there have been no more acts of violence by Salafist jihadis on Mauritanian territory since February 2011. Even though this increased security could be reassessed in the light of recent revelations about the hypothetical non-aggression pact (*moutaraka*) between Al-Qaeda and Mauritania<sup>5</sup>, as far as these can be confirmed. Even his opponents have to give some credit to

President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz on this subject. However, capitalising on this security stock must not blind Mauritania's partners, particularly to the regime's development and its unique governance.

When he came to power, President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz claimed to carry out a series of breaks with his predecessors. He wanted to be the spokesperson for the poor and those who have been left behind after a campaign conducted with much fanfare in places, the *kebe* (shanty town districts), usually ignored by the major presidential candidates. The early period of the Abdel Aziz era was furthermore marked by genuine achievements (services, housing developments, roads which opened up areas, etc.) In one part of Mauritanian public opinion, the "candidate of the poor" now has an image of a president who has personally grown rich, and extensively serves his friends and tribe via a still flawed system for allocating public contracts and through an income capture system from the mining industry, as an investigation by the newspaper *Le Monde*<sup>6</sup> revealed in late 2015, after the US Department of Justice and the *Securities and Exchange Commission* (SEC) started an investigation into the company, Tasiast Mauritanie Limited, a subsidiary of the multi-national Kinross Gold Corporation.

The image of a modernising president at the head of a country experiencing strong growth driven by the extractive industries<sup>7</sup> (iron, gold, copper, oil, gas, etc.) is now tarnished. Indeed, its economic governance, obscured for a time by strong economic expansion linked to the appreciation in international prices of the country's main export products and by increased foreign direct investment (FDI) in these same sectors, nowadays finds itself exposed by the downturn in these prices.

The site for the new airport seems to be the most striking metaphor for the country's erratic modernisation. The project was approved during the cabinet meeting on 13 November 2011. The work was to have started in January 2012 and the airport to be delivered 24 months later. According to different interviews conducted in Nouakchott in early 2016, the airport is in the sensitive certification phase.

The construction contract for this airport was allocated as a form of

barter to the Mauritanian company, Najah Major Works S.A., a company whose only website states that it was founded... in 2011. This company is a subsidiary of a Mauritanian conglomerate, the ASML Group, which is known primarily for its operations in cement production (Ciment de Mauritanie), milk production (Top lait), but also in new information and communication technology (NICT) (Top Technologie), the hire of construction equipment (TCE) and which has, in addition to Najah Major Works, another construction and public works subsidiary (MCE) which is only known for constructing a few buildings in Nouakchott.

As payment, the company notably received half the land of the current Nouakchott airport, which, given the enormous expansion of the Mauritanian capital, is now at the centre of the agglomeration. The company can pre-sell this area as building land and has received loans of public money to support its cash flow<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, at the time when the large Mauritanian mining company, SNIM<sup>9</sup>, had to manage the impact of falling iron ore prices, the Mauritanian authorities asked it to lend several million dollars to Najah Major Works. This company is a symbol of Mauritanian identity and this loan is weakening its economic balance even more, even forcing it to sell subsidiaries to absorb the shock.

This mess cannot be grasped in its entirety, if you were not aware of the (dis) proportion of this site. The new airport was sized to accommodate 2.5 million passengers annually, whereas the current airport absorbs a few daily flights very well and 200 - 250,000 annual passengers. It is also questionable how Nouakchott could attract ten times more passengers and thus compete with the two hubs in this part of Africa, Casablanca and Dakar... An expensive and oversized project which is undermining the public accounts and a major national company, carried out without a tender and handed over on a plate to a company which seems to have been founded for the purpose; this project illustrates this very *top down* governance. It was a decision taken by the presidency without deliberation and without prior consultation with experts; without a safeguard, which illustrates a sort of presidential *hubris*.

The undeniable security successes of the Mauritanian president and

the exceptional appreciation in the prices of some raw materials during his first term of office hid the weaknesses of President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz's regime. The country's partners should not turn a blind eye to the increasingly evident weaknesses of this country.

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1. A promise that he made during the 2014 presidential elections.
  2. "Mauritanie: un 3<sup>ème</sup> mandat pour Aziz?", *BBC*, 31 March 2016.
  3. This paper was written after a visit to Nouakchott in February 2016.
  4. 2005-2007.
  5. "Al Qaeda Leaders Made Plans for Peace Deal with Mauritania", *Reuters*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2014.
  6. See in particular the following articles published in *Le Monde Afrique* as part of this enquiry: "Kinross, en Mauritanie, la malédiction de la mine d'or de Tasiast", 13 November 2015; "Mauritanie: le géant minier Kinross dans le viseur des autorités américaines", 4 December 2015; "Kinross en Mauritanie: "Le niveau de corruption devenait ubuesque", 10 December 2015; et "Kinross en Mauritanie: "Cette enquête pourrait devenir une histoire judiciaire exemplaire", 17 December 2015.
  7. A. Antil, "Le boom minier au Sahel, un développement durable?", *Notes de l'Ifri*, February 2014, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).
  8. Land near the new airport has also been allocated to it.
  9. Société nationale industrielle et minière (National Industrial and Mining Company).