

## The Army and The Mauritanian Political System

### Ordu ve Moritanya Siyasi Sistemi

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**Abstract:** This study examines the role of the army in Mauritanian politics and the answer to the question: what will civil-military relations look like in the event of a transition to a democratic political system? The study focuses on the role of control and accountability in making the military institution accountable to the National Assembly in order to reduce its influence in political life, and on the importance of reforming it in order to strengthen the democratic transition in Mauritania. This study assumes that the reasons for the military intervention are due to the fact that the colonizer left no institutions, since France did not meet the requirements of the nascent Mauritanian state. The Mauritanian political system adopted democracy before the establishment of a strong state, with an institutional character that increased participation in political life. The study concludes that the difficult experience of working in Mauritania requires a great deal of time and patience, and that the country's chances of achieving a democratic transition are greater than before if the army is removed from the political process and competitive elections are held.

**Keywords:** Mauritania, military, political system, civilian control, democracy.

**Öz:** Bu çalışma, Moritanya siyasetinde ordunun rolünü ve bununla ilgili olarak şu sorunun cevabını aramaktadır: Demokratik siyasal sisteme geçiş durumunda sivil-asker ilişkileri nasıl olacaktır? Çalışma, askeri kurumun siyasi yaşamdaki etkisini azaltmak amacıyla Ulusal Meclis'e karşı hesap verebilir hale getirilmesinde kontrol ve hesap verebilirliğin rolüne ve Moritanya'da demokratik geçişin güçlendirilmesi için reform yapılmasının önemine odaklanmaktadır. Bu çalışma, askeri müdahalenin nedenlerinin, Fransa'nın yeni oluşan Moritanya devletinin gereksinimlerini karşılamaması nedeniyle sömürgecinin hiçbir kurum bırakmamasından kaynaklandığını varsaymaktadır. Moritanya siyasi sistemi, siyasi hayata katılımı artıran kurumsal bir karaktere sahip, güçlü bir devletin kurulmasından önce demokrasiyi benimsemiştir. Çalışma, Moritanya'da çalışmanın zorlu deneyiminin çok fazla zaman ve sabır gerektirdiğini ve ordunun siyasi süreçten uzaklaştırılması ve rekabetçi seçimler yapılması halinde ülkenin demokratik geçişe ulaşma şansının eskisinden daha yüksek olduğu sonucuna varıyor.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Moritanya, Ordu, Politik sistem, sivil kontrol, demokrasi.

## Introduction

After the two world wars, the army played an increasingly important role in political life. The militarization of politics became a way of life in Latin America, while the wars of liberation that preceded the occupation phase in the first quarter of the last century created the conditions for military intervention in politics and governance.

As for the countries of the African continent, from the mid-1960s to the present day, they have been hit by a rapid wave of military coups, the most recent of which occurred in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso in 2022. In fact, most African countries have been under military rather than civilian rule since independence. Nigeria, Ghana and Benin are clear examples (Abdel R. Hassan, 1996). The phenomenon of military governments emerged when armies went beyond their military function to play political, economic and security roles (Mady, 2021).

In the Arab region, the phenomenon of military coups has become widespread, with the military seizing power in Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Sudan and Mauritania. Most of the regimes in the Arab world, and in the so-called Third World in general, are the result of military coups, since it can be said that it is the military that has ruled the modern Arab state, with the exception of a few periods in which civilians had a share of power, even if nominally (Al-Anani, 2019). The events of the Arab Spring, the army returned after a brief democratic experience to take power and abort the process of democratic transformation, as in the case of Egypt. The Arab reality shows us that Arab armies have been influenced in their formation and organization by the history and composition of society, as well as by the nature of the political system of the countries to which they belong. Each army has been a special case that has provoked special reactions during the Arab revolutions (Ghomari, 2019).

Samuel Huntington distinguishes between political systems that have achieved a high degree of institutionalization and those that have achieved only a low degree of participation by identifying three levels: at the lowest level, participation is limited to a small, traditional aristocratic or bureaucratic elite; at the intermediate level, the middle class enters politics; in a highly participatory political entity, the elite, the middle class, and the masses - as a whole - participate in political activity (Huntington Samuel, 1968). Every political system is the image of a social substance, that is, the embodiment of a social system in which natural and cultural, social and political, historical and environmental factors act and struggle to shape its process. This observation is all the more necessary when the discourse of democracy, as a system of supremacy of legal institutions, is applied to a country like Mauritania, which has not yet experienced the institution of the state in its entirety, except for the institution of the army (Huntington. Samuel, 1968).

In addition, the French colonialists spared no effort to differentiate between the components of Mauritanian society and to drive a wedge between its races and ethnicities. This is demonstrated by the adoption of a policy based on the distinction between Arab Mauritians and their black and African counterparts in terms of conscription and taxation. With regard to military conscription, black Mauritians were subject to a system similar to that applied to the local population in French colonies in West Africa. As for the Arab Mauritians, only those who chose to do so voluntarily had to register for military service. Such a situation is fraught with difficulties and risks, including the fact that the colonizer did not establish any infrastructure in the country or public institutions on which the new authority could rely to administer the country. And since Mauritania was at that time the object of many regional claims, the civilian regime in power at the time sought to shake the foundations of the traditional structure of the system, recognizing the impossibility of coexistence between these traditional structures and the state in its modern sense, based on the ideas of citizenship, equality and the rule of law (Ndary. Ahmed, 2017: 101).

This study assumes that the problems of the Mauritanian state lie in the fact that the colonizer did not leave behind any institutions and in the adoption of a democratic system before the establishment of a strong state and the existence of a political system that carries out political organization of an institutional nature that increases participation in political life and provides basic services. The study believes that Mauritania must build a strong state with a controlling political system that provides political organization of an institutional nature that increases participation in political life and provides public services. This is what Mauritania's political system needs. Because Mauritania was born by force, the colonizers did not leave any institutions. Mauritania did not have a highly institutionalized political system of an organized nature, and the political

system did not establish political and administrative institutions based on the political institutions of the state. In fact, from independence to the present day, Mauritania has not known a state in the modern sense, i.e. a state of laws and institutions, and it still faces obstacles on several levels, including the influence of the tribe and the army and their control over the state.

The absence of these institutions gave the army the opportunity to seize power and control the Mauritanian political system since 1978. Despite the change, which did not go beyond the head of the regime and did not include the social composition of political power, the political system itself remained the same.

This study relies on the historical approach and the comparative analytical approach to learn more about this phenomenon, to reveal the differences between the historical stages that the country has gone through and the possibility of reforming the military institution in Mauritania.

This study also seeks to answer the question of the nature of the relationship between the state and the military in Mauritania from the first coup until today. What are the main achievements of the military? What is its impact on the political system? What stages has the military institution gone through? What is its role in the political process in Mauritania? What is the role of the parliament in fighting corruption in relation to the military institution by activating transparency and accountability?

### **The military in political life**

Mauritania's political system has undergone changes and political instability, and the country has been subject to military rather than civilian rule. The Mauritanian army, like most African armies at the time of independence, was created three days before the declaration of independence on November 25, 1960. In 1968, the army received 1.4 percent of the total gross domestic product, and by 2020, military spending had reached 12.5 percent. According to a 2021 report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Mauritania's military spending since independence has reached \$1.8 billion. If we look at the social sphere, we see that the huge expenditure on the military budget is twice what the government spends on education and health. In the absence of parliamentary control, this increases the level of corruption within the military institution, and the legislative institution is not immune to dependency and corruption. This is normal in a country like Mauritania, where the parliament is part of the political system. "Therefore, in practice, given the army's control of the presidency and parliament through the ruling party, as well as the membership of relatives of army commanders in key parliamentary committees, particularly that of "Justice, Interior and Defense". In committee, it is difficult to make a serious statement on parliamentary control of the army's budget, given the legal

and practical considerations and the lack of transparency and information". Le Mauritanien with great precision" ( Sayed, 2015). All this requires a high level of control, transparency and accountability in the management of the military institutions, as well as control over the relations between them and the civilian institutions of the state (Mady, 2021).

It can be noted that there are two basic stages that Mauritania has gone through since its independence: the stage of military coups and the stage of democratization of the political system.

In the first phase, after independence, Mauritania witnessed coups d'état that later evolved into a struggle between the military for power and political and financial influence, with one soldier replacing another in a corrupt political system. In the second phase, the political system changed from a military regime to an authoritarian regime led by Lieutenant Colonel Maaouya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya.

The post-independence period was less corrupt than the democratization phase of the early 1990s. After independence, the country was not ready for institutional governance, which created an institutional vacuum in the Mauritanian political system. It increased the chances of the army coming to power at the expense of the opposition and political parties. The country was moving from a civilian to a praetorian system.

The Praetorian regime began to justify its rise to power by describing the guardian as the protector of the country and responsible for the political system from outside interference (the Desert War), which later became an ideology that governs the political system and stands in the way of establishing democracy in the country.

But the decisive military intervention began with the Sahara War. This war changed the structure of the Mauritanian army, whose numbers multiplied nine times in two years, from 2,000 to 18,000 (Ould Saad and Abdel-Hay,2009). During the last phase of the Sahara War, the country experienced an unprecedented deterioration of its general conditions at all levels. On the economic level, the war has exhausted all the country's internal resources, foreign aid has stopped, and the export of iron has been disrupted by the Polisario's attacks on the train that carries it from the Zouerate mines to the export port of Nouadhibou. As for the home front, it has begun to disintegrate, as the length of the war and its high cost have caused voices to be raised against the war in one way or another.

In this reality, the idea of a coup against the regime of Mokhtar Ould Daddah was born. A coup d'état was the only way for the military to stop this war, given the insistence of the regime and the president himself to continue the war. It is known that the first to think about the coup was Colonel Mostafa Ould Mohamed Salek and Major Salek was born. At the beginning of 1978, the regime gave the

soldiers a “precious gift”, without realizing it, by appointing Al-Mustafa as the commander of the general staff. They began to intensify their meetings, some of which took place in the General Staff or in some places affiliated to the Sixth Military District. These meetings also began to deal with detailed matters such as discussing the statement that would be issued after the coup. which will be issued after the coup, the formation of the Military Committee, the treatment of senior officers loyal to the regime and other details. In addition to the civil wing that stood with them in the “July 10” project, such as our Sheikh Ould Muhammad Al-Aghdaf and other figures from the people of the east, as well as some leaders of political movements (Ould Haidalla, 2012). Since the success of the 1978 coup d’état and the appointment of the army chief of staff, Colonel Mustafa Ould Mohamed Salek, to the presidency of the Military Committee for the Salvation of the Nation, as well as to the presidency of the State, the abolition of the Constitution and the dissolution of the Parliament, it has become clear that the country is on the verge of military domination of politics. The new rulers see the state as a prize to be taken by force of arms (Ould B. Boune, July 21019).

The military did not have a clear vision of politics and the management of public affairs in Mauritania, and its prolonged exercise of power, management of political life and exploitation of the many privileges of power led it to cling to power and to try to return to it and to interfere in it constantly, which led Mauritania into a vicious circle of backwardness and tyrannical rule (Ould, Salek, 2014).

During the reign of Mokhtar Ould Daddah, the army was exposed to its worst conditions because it failed its first test in the face of the external threat due to its small size and the weakness of its tools. Subsequently, the army was isolated in its use of force and domination, which led to these disasters, development backwardness and instability. Many of Mauritania’s misfortunes were due to the failure of military rule in the country, and the military allied itself with traditional notables, tribal leaders and religious sheikhdoms to achieve its interests, and this alliance directly affects the decisions of the authority.

### **The Military’s Struggle for Power**

From 1978 to 1991, the struggle for power within the army intensified and a succession of officers ruled the country. This military intervention was due to the weakness of the institutions established after independence and their lack of control over the military establishment, as well as the growing role of the military in political life due to the absence of opposition and deteriorating economic and social conditions. This justified the rise of the army and established military rule for over forty years.

Since the 1978 coup d’état, the military’s political influence has remained very strong. All of the country’s presidents since then have been army officers (Al-Ayoubi. Nazih, 2010).

The military institution, in the form in which it took power in 1978, is a concentrated caricature of the comprador class. At the beginning, despite the presence of elements with a clear composition in its ranks, it represented a marginal nucleus that formed in isolation from the nascent civilian movement, since it was not able to attract young people and activists of the nascent civilian space, except on a marginal level.

Its takeover of the regime, as we saw earlier, was a takeover of the state and all its institutions, that is, it was a takeover of the regime - the state. It was subordinated to various other state institutions (Al-Murabiti, 2022).

During this period, the Mauritanian political system underwent many reorganizations, including many attempts to return to a normal constitutional and political system. At the constitutional level, Mauritania saw many "constitutional charters" in 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981 and 1985. On the political level, Mauritania has had four presidents: Colonel Mustapha Ould Mohamed Salek (1978-1979) and Colonel Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Ahmed Louli (1979-1980), Lieutenant Colonel Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidala (1980-1984), and Lieutenant Colonel Muawiyah Ould Sayed Ahmed Taya (Bbout, A. Salem, 2018).

Thus, the subsequent coups, whether declared or silent, took on a significance beyond that of a conflict within the same limited group. At most levels, it was an expression of the conflict of pre-national authorities and affiliations, half-spoken or partially expressed in informal forms of communication, which at the time seemed to be the most widespread and effective in the face of contemporary social transformations and formations (Al-Murabiti, 2022: 86-87).

With the replacement of the civilian system by a military one, and the prohibition of all popular and political practices except within the structures of mass culture (Ould, S. Baba, 2005). the citizen was confronted with the most complex and controlling systems. Mass culture represented a dangerous and active intelligence system that provided the regime with comprehensive information on the political orientations of citizens, and then distributed the privileges of power according to the logic of carrots and sticks, and the new regime often tried to reorganize roles and create its own political class through which it consolidated the pillars of its power, relying on the principle of loyalty (Ould Deddah, winter 2011: 52).

At this point, the army could no longer do without the civilians and vice versa, and coups became the norm rather than the exception, some succeeding, others failing. In principle, these coups did not have the same motivations, but in form they represented a phenomenon, even if they differed in their motivations and origins (Al-Karawi, Summer 2011: 134). After seizing power, the military regimes failed to achieve development and stability due to the divisions and conflicts within the ranks of the army for power since 1978. With each coup d'état and

military takeover, the coup plotters justify their seizure of power under the pretext of fighting corruption, achieving development or saving the state from collapse and transitioning the country to democracy, while the country is subjected to tyranny under their regime. This race for power is all about wealth, personal interests and position in the political system.

There is no way for officers to seize power and change their status except through a military coup. The army leaves a corrupt legacy at the social, economic and political levels. This prompted a call for help from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The "structural reform" came as a panacea for this type of situation (Ould, Mottaly, 1992). However, the implementation of this reform caused a deficit in the general budget and in the balance of payments, an increase in debt, an inflation rate, a collapse in the value of the currency, and the liquidation of public institutions. Unemployment increased, anxiety reigned, and despair gripped the people (Ould, A. Zekeria, 2004).

The economic crisis of the 1980s played a crucial role in the democratization of the political system, but it did not change the nature of the Mauritanian state, and society itself remained unchanged. Clientelism, political favoritism and rampant corruption in the political system continued to dominate the Mauritanian state, even though the regime was capable of reform. Despite the change in the political system, the basic structure of society remained unchanged.

In 1988, Maaouya Ould Taya led a successful coup against President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla. Colonel Ould Taya's government introduced reforms and announced the establishment of a new political system. Since 1991, his government has entered a period of limited political openness. During this period, a new constitution was drafted for the country, the Constitution of July 20, 1991, which allowed political pluralism and freedom of the press for the first time since independence in 1960. In this context, a series of civil institutions were established, the most important of which are: a bicameral parliament (deputies and senators), elected municipal councils, an appointed constitutional council, and an Islamic parliament, in addition to numerous presidential, legislative, and municipal mandates (Bin Muhammad, May 2007: 61). This transition to a pluralist party system, through which President Muawiyah was unable to build institutions and his regime evolved into an authoritarian individual system. During this period, Mauritania witnessed a notable increase in the influence of tribal frameworks of assembly and political action, particularly the growing economic, political, and security weight of the tribe of the Supreme Guide himself. Here, tribal "general assemblies" are openly encouraged to be used to disseminate decisions emanating from "structures designed to cultivate the masses. They are also used to grant personal loyalty to the Colonel-President in the form of the "Sultan's" oath of allegiance during his visits to the interior of the country. These visits intensified, in a festive, almost regal atmosphere, as



his authority grew stronger. On such occasions, senior administrative officials (ministers, directors, etc.) must return to their tribes to formalize their submission to the king. They must be active in both administrative and tribal capacities (Ould, Sheikh, 2017: 9).

Nepotism in the country has reached such a level that some employees receive their salaries from the state without knowing where they work. In addition to nepotistic appointments to government jobs and senior administrative positions at the expense of those with qualifications and credentials. Recently, the current regime has begun to organize competitions and examinations for access to public employment, through which it is trying to reduce favoritism in appointments to government posts and reform the public sector.

### **The Democratic Series in Mauritania: Democratic Transformation or Dictatorship in The Guise of Democracy?**

Democratic transition depends to a large extent on the agreement of the political forces seeking peaceful change on a democratic system of government with its recognized foundations, principles, mechanisms, controls and guarantees, as an alternative to the system of government by one or a few individuals (Alkuwari and Mady, 2009: 9). The absence of such a consensus is one of the main obstacles to the completion of the transition to democracy in Mauritania. This may be due to the fact that democracy in Mauritania was imposed by donor countries (Mohamed Horma, E. February 2022: 51). with the external factor playing an important role in the so-called democratic process in Mauritania, as external pressure began to demand political reforms in Mauritania in the early 1990s, opening the door to political openness and the holding of pluralistic elections in the country. This made it easier for the dictator, Maouya Ould Taya, to embrace democracy and describe what was happening as a democratic transition to ease the pressure. Maouia then abandoned his military uniform and began to appear in civilian clothes, ruling Mauritania for two decades. Under his rule, the country was transformed into an army and tribal state, with loyalists and sons of notables in high positions.

Ould Taya based his regime on traditional structures and a group of relatives and notables to control the state. The democratic transformation of the 1990s had little impact on economic, political, and social aspects. In fact, the regime tried to harmonize government policies with those of donors and international financial institutions. These policies have had a significant impact on Mauritania's domestic politics. On the other hand, these programs and policies have also led to the emergence of what is known in international studies as democratic conditionality. This was explicitly crystallized in Mitterrand's speech at the La Baule Summit, when he linked the provision of economic aid to African countries to their degree of commitment to liberal values, particularly those related to democracy and human rights (Ould M. Ibrahimat, June 2018: 77).

Although Mauritania held three multi-party presidential elections in 1992, 1997 and 2003, the winner was always Colonel Ould Taya. It can therefore be said that the dominant feature of this limited political openness has remained chronic political tension, characterized by the permanent restriction of public freedoms, sometimes even their denial through the dissolution of political parties and the confiscation of independent newspapers (Bin Muhammad, 2007: 62).

Muawiyah was unable to establish political institutions and limited himself to a formal democracy, which resulted in political chaos. The 1991 constitution contributed to the institutional dominance of the President of the Republic over the political system.

The 1991 Constitution also emphasized the prohibition of political parties based on tribe, region, ethnicity or religious affiliation, which the political regime of the time used as an excuse to prevent the Islamic Umma Party from obtaining a license.

The tribe allied itself with the ruling dictatorship, and this alliance and the clientelism network played an important role in the survival of the dictator Muawiyah over a long period in power. We note that all successive regimes in the country promised to establish a democratic system, but failed to do so, as is the custom with authoritarian regimes, and it later became clear that this was an approach by the rulers to legitimize their power.

The impact of ethnic, tribal and regional diversity on the path of democratic transformation in Mauritania, and with the change in the path of democratic transformation during this period, Mauritania was almost exposed to civil war, and bitter rhetoric about the humanitarian legacy multiplied, and accusations were made against the Ould Taya regime related to human rights violations, "represented by illegal arrests and kidnappings. There were also cases of torture. Among the most notorious of these arrests are those that took place in 2003 and 2004 against certain symbols of the Islamic movement and its leaders. One of the most striking and painful cases was the kidnapping of the engineer Mohamedou Ould El-Salahi by the Mauritanian authorities and his extradition to the United States, where he ended up in the Guantanamo detention center (Ndary, January 2021: 55). Since the mid-1980s, Mauritania's political system has suffered from problems that international human rights organizations have described as violations justifying condemnation of the military regime in power in Mauritania, particularly those related to the physical liquidation and torture in military prisons of black Mauritians, some of whose officers attempted to overthrow the regime on two occasions (1986-1987), known locally as the African Flame Uprising (Ould S. Baba, 2004).

In addition, Muawiyah's regime repressed Islamists and prevented them from participating in elections throughout his tenure. And his party had a

monopoly on political participation. This emboldened the Islamists - who supported Saleh Ould Hanna's coup - to revolt and attempt to overthrow him. Most previous coups during the Ould Taya period did not come from the top of the military establishment and did not receive the support of the army chiefs, which hindered their success. After Saleh Ould Hanna's coup and the increase in popular pressure, the army seized the opportunity to further control the political system, strengthen its position in power, and seize power.

The transition to democracy resulted in the existence of a strong political system, but an incomplete democracy. This contributed to the fact that the dictatorial regime established a constitution that was not based on the realization of democracy and allowed traditional structures to dominate the regime and benefit from the country's wealth.

All of this was done in the name of reform and democracy in favor of the traditional forces and in the service of the dictator Ould Taya, resulting in widespread corruption in the army and state institutions, as well as the shrinking of the public sphere and the persecution of opponents. This created the political conditions for the army to overthrow Ould Taya in a military coup led by a group of reformist officers in 2005 (Mohamed Horma. E, May 2022).

### **The Reformed Soldier: Aly Ould Mohamed Vall**

After failed coup attempts and popular demonstrations demanding change during Muawiyah's 21-year reign, a group of reform-minded officers overthrew Muawiyah Ould Sidi Ahmed Taya's regime on August 3, 2005. The coup came from within the regime itself. A military council called the Military Council for Justice and Democracy, composed of the most prominent military elements on which Ould Taya's regime deposed him while he was on a condolence visit to Saudi Arabia, with Colonel Aly Ould Mohamed Vall, former longtime director of national public security (1985-2005), assuming the presidency and becoming the supreme head of the military council and the state. Colonel Ould Mohamed Vall announced that his stay in power would not last longer than necessary to put the country on the path of genuine democratic transformation, stressing that a transitional period of no more than two years would be sufficient for the military council and its transitional government to carry out certain reforms to support this transformation. In fact, the Military Council and its interim government have taken three major steps to achieve this program: they organized a constitutional referendum on June 25, 2006, to approve amendments to the constitution, and then worked to organize parliamentary and local elections on November 19, 2006, and for the second session of the National Assembly on December 19, 2006. 2006 and for its second session of representatives on December 3 of the same year. It reached its final stage with the organization of presidential elections in March 2007 (Bin Muhammad, 2007: 63-64).

The August 3, 2005 coup and the reforms led by President Ely Ould Mohamed Vall paved the way for democratic rule in Mauritania. Elections were held and civilian rule was restored, but the elected civilian regime was soon overthrown and the army regained power. The army's intervention to remove President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallah was motivated by fear for the interests of the military establishment. The political parties were unprepared at the time, and the opportunity for a genuine transition of society to democracy, for the establishment of the rule of law and institutions, and for the success of the democratic experiment in the country was lost. This proves that President Ely Ould Mohamed Vall's decision on who would govern after the transition period was not a collective decision by the army, and that internal conflicts between young officers and the first generation affected the completion of the democratic path in Mauritania.

In Mauritania, senior military commanders have rejected the decisions of the civilian authorities and failed to carry out orders, culminating at one point in the rebellion of Generals Aziz and Ghazouani following President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallah's decision to dismiss them. At other times, the military acted as it pleased, without authorization from the civilian authorities, to get what it wanted.

Coups usually occur when the army doesn't like the government's plans and has no choice but to use a military coup to overthrow the regime and seize power. A case in point was Aziz's coup against the elected civilian president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallah, in August 2008. During this coup, few people in the political system or parties supported him, with the exception of the largest opposition party, the Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques.

This gives us the idea that General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz was one of the former officers who refused to hand over power to civilians during the transitional period. This means that no president can come to power without the support of the army. The army only relinquishes power in the event of a split within the military establishment or disagreement among army officers, in which case elections are held. This has happened twice: the first time, after the 2005 coup d'état, the army was divided as young officers tried to seize power and young officers replaced older officers of the first generation to realize their ambitions to come to power.

The second time, the generals refused to violate the constitution and appointed Aziz for a third mission. Aziz issued a statement after his trip to the Emirates, declaring his respect for the constitution and his intention not to seek a third term in the 2019 elections.

### **The Counter-Coup and the Black Decade in Mauritania**

The military coup that overthrew civilian rule ushered in the black decade of authoritarian rule that ended in 2019. The coup brought in a corrupt government led by Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, and when Aziz took power in 2009, Ould Abdel Aziz began to pursue an anti-corruption policy under the slogan "President of the poor and of corruption". He called his opponents spoilers. General Aziz announced the creation of a political party called the Union for the Republic Party and was twice elected president of the country. He extends his authority over the military institution and the political party. The militarization of society and politics in the country and the personalization of the government through formal, undemocratic elections. Thus, Aziz's regime tried to gain legitimacy by relying on the fight against corruption and support for the poor in order to gain social acceptance. Legally, it sought to restore its legitimacy through new constitutional amendments that lacked broad national consensus and by holding elections.

The creation of the Union for the Republic Party by President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz after he took power contributed to the personalization of authoritarian rule and the individual state. The dictator here is the one who chooses the head of the party and its leaders, and who controls the resources needed to maintain its existence. The regime became an individual dictatorship surrounded by a "ruling family" with a network of loyalties and clientelistic relationships that extended to the armed forces, the ruling party, and among businessmen. For more on the creation of post-conflict parties by dictators to protect themselves, see (Barbara Geddes, 2018: 187).

In addition to all this, Aziz owned economic enterprises and deepened the partnership between the military establishment and the president at the beginning of his rule, before he took power alone and excluded his companions. What distinguishes Aziz from his peers is that he had complete control over the military establishment. Since the 2005 coup, he has taken control of all state authorities. He is a son of the military establishment. He held several positions before taking power and participated in the planning of several coups.

Aziz also had the means of soft power and wanted people to rally around him. He controlled the army and the media and cooperated with his opponents to achieve their political and material demands. He privatized corruption; he kept it focused on his service by granting expensive land to his loyalists, in addition to owning villas abroad and transferring money to international banks in the Emirates and Switzerland. He distributed power among himself and those close to him, granting them huge projects in addition to the loans and aid that flowed into their accounts.

Aziz's regime was known for its contempt for academics and national skills, a state of political elimination and public freedoms, as well as for tracking down and eliminating its opponents. For example, what candidate Biram Ould Dah Abeidi was subjected to during the 2014 presidential and 2019 legislative elections, when he was arrested and prevented from campaigning and accused of conspiring against the regime and inciting hatred. This is due to the nature of the political system and the lack of oversight, which has allowed the military institution to operate more and exceed its powers. The intelligence services monitor and repress opposition forces. The harassment of former senator Mohamed Ould Ghadda, who opposed constitutional amendments in 2017, is a clear example.

This is in addition to the crisis of participation due to the large number of parties involved in the political process, which led to its liquidation in 2019 with the enactment of a law dissolving parties that obtained less than 1 percent in the 2013 and 2018 municipal elections.

In addition, Aziz carried out corrupt operations, indicating that he was working on his own behalf to obtain money, even through suspicious transactions. By concluding suspicious and illegal agreements with foreign companies in the fisheries and mineral sectors and several other agreements that led to the persistence of corruption and the absence of good governance in the country.

Successive regimes have relied on businessmen and traditional forces in elections. The owners of these alliances received facilities and guarantees in the trade and fishing sectors, or in the establishment of parties and the opening of satellite channels, or exemption from customs, and benefited from public funds, in addition to assuming leadership positions and important roles in the state, at the expense of the people and deprived of their national revolution.

Citizens still do not feel loyal to the nation, but rather owe their loyalty to the tribe, village/region, or ethnicity in which they live rather than to a state. This seems to be the case when their choices are known in advance. Either they give in to the temptations of the ruling party because they need money, or they give their votes to the traditional elite in exchange for privileges if their candidate comes to power. Fukuyama argues that the emergence of a large middle class has important implications for the practices of patronage, clientelism, and forms of political corruption, and that clientelism is an early form of democracy: in societies with many poor and poorly educated voters, the easiest form of electoral mobilization is often the provision of individual subsidies and benefits. This suggests that clientelism will be limited as voters become more affluent, not only because it becomes more costly for politicians to bribe them, but also because voters themselves see that their interests are linked to broader public policies rather than individual benefits (Fukuyama, 2016: 566).

Mauritanian researcher Boun Ould Bahi likens “what happened in Mauritania in 2019 to a ‘revolution at the top of the regime’ led by the constitution, because the constitution was the fundamental basis for imposing change” (Ould B. Boune, September 2020: 66). On the other hand, the military institution still occupies the most important position on the Mauritanian political scene, given the agreement of its leaders to support the current president in the recent elections, who is considered their only representative (Presidential elections in Mauritania, June 27, 2019: 3).

The leaders of the military establishment went to great lengths to prevent President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz from running for a third term. Aziz believed that he could maintain the ruling party, but the party split like all the parties that had ruled before and the party remained under the authority of the ruling elite and ended up with Aziz and the old elite outside the party. The name of the party was changed from “Union for the Republic” to “Insaf” party.

The irony is that Ould Abdel Aziz’s regime, which came up with the slogan of fighting corruption and being against spoilers, made the same mistakes and was involved in the very corruption it had previously attacked. Charges of corruption and abuse of power were brought against him and he was thrown in prison.

### **The Current Regime and the Hope for Reform**

The current regime inherited a state drowning in debt and in a state of bankruptcy, as the general treasury of the Mauritanian state, on the day President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani took power on July 31, 2019, amounted to 26 billion old ouguiyas (\$72.2 million), 18 of which were subsidies from the World Bank (Alakhbar, info. 2022).

All state funds and foreign aid went into the pockets of those close to Aziz and the country’s corrupt political elite.

The country has known several committees to investigate corruption cases, the most recent of which was the Parliamentary Investigation Committee in 2020. Since the establishment of these committees, the investigations have not included officials and officers in the army and allies of successive governments, and no charges have been brought against them related to corruption, misuse of public funds, and human rights violations. This hampers the performance of the public administration and the fight against corruption, increases the spread of clientelism and nepotism within state institutions, and postpones good governance in Mauritania. It can be said that these committees were not serious about their objectives from the outset.

What’s more, Mauritania’s political system is based on tribal, ethnic, and class relations, and the relationship between the tribes and the state is constantly shifting, with the ruling tribe having varying degrees of control over state

resources. In addition to the tribe's alliance with the ruling political and military elite, it controls all economic and social affairs of the state. Loyal tribes hold the lion's share of leadership positions in the army and state. It extends its grip on power and takes control of the country's revolution. When a new president comes to power, new tribes and businessmen rise with him to monopolize power.

Nevertheless, the Mauritanian political system has achieved some positive results, which can be attributed to its ability to adapt, to overcome major national crises and challenges, to combat ethnic and tribal differences and to eliminate all divisions within society. This is perhaps due to the value system of the people and the nature of Mauritanian society.

### **New Challenges for the Political System**

One of the greatest challenges facing Mauritania is to achieve development, and focusing on development can lead to progress and development for the country. Mauritania suffers from a weakness due to its backwardness in health and education and the lack of basic services. If the government fails to provide basic services to its citizens, it will have a negative impact on them and encourage young people to emigrate from the country and dislike politics, thereby increasing the loss of confidence in the government.

Mauritania needs an independent political system that aims to build a social state by defining public policies in favor of vulnerable social groups to get out of the miserable situation that Mauritania suffers. In addition to developing policies to improve people's living conditions and meet their needs in terms of education, health and housing, they contribute to development and reduce the spread of poverty and corruption. Accelerate the process of political and social reform beyond the close tribal and ethnic ties that have been entrenched in the country by successive corrupt regimes. In order to achieve social justice and establish an emerging consensual system with a new political elite willing to develop a political system, previously excluded groups must be included in the system and new elites must take on new roles that contribute to changing the political system. If there is a will on the part of the regime to transform the country into a better state.

This stage can be the end of the post-colonial state and the beginning of the construction of the national state. If this approach is aimed at achieving equality of citizens before the law and popular participation in government, expanding the scope of participation in political life and institutionalizing the system to strengthen democracy and good governance in the country.

There are signs of prospects for the development of the political system in Mauritania. We note that the current regime is trying to develop a political discourse based on citizenship and the rule of law, to go beyond the narrow



discourse of the country. For example, the speech of President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani in the city of Ouadane, the speech of the President of the Parliament at the end of the first session of the Parliament in January 2022, and the speech of President Ghazouani at the graduation ceremony of the students of the Oudane University. National School of Administration, in which he called for reforming the administration and bringing it closer to the citizens.

### **Reform of the Military Institution**

The army has controlled political life in Mauritania since 1978. If we look at the history of cooperation between the military and governments, we find a clear influence of the army on the presidents of Mauritania, and it is often the decision maker in setting security policies, not the government. Over the past forty years, the role of civilian control over the military institution has diminished. Civil-military relations in Mauritania can be described as a relationship of cooperation between politicians and the military, due to their permanent interference in political affairs and the electoral process to attract supporters to support their candidate in the elections. Elections are an opportunity for citizens to easily make money by selling their votes. As for the political elite, they use politics as a way to gain wealth in the country. Promotions of army officers are usually based on political loyalties and criteria rather than military competence. The lack of control over civil-military relations and the absence of various parliamentary oversight and accountability mechanisms have led to the military institution escaping oversight and benefiting from illegal privileges and a kind of immunity. As a result, it strongly resists any oversight or control by the executive or parliament and refuses to withdraw from civilian economic activities (Saadi, January 2017: 69).

The army is the most important factor in Mauritania's political life. There is no doubt that the military institution in Mauritania needs reform and a change in the democratic culture of the armed forces, in which loyalty is to the fatherland.

Reforming the army requires building a strong army independent of the fragile or non-existent foundations left by authoritarian powers, consulting democratically minded senior officers on the details and modalities of reform, and ending the army's involvement in the economy. Political interference should not be allowed in the usual promotions of lower-ranking personnel, nor should it interfere with military education, training and professional matters, unless this is contrary to fundamental democratic values (Barani, Zoltan, January 2017: 93). work to distance the military institution from political life by constitutionalizing its functions and unifying the army, integrating the presidential guard into the national security council, and purifying the military institution of all corrupt elements that have participated in the spread of financial and administrative corruption that Mauritania has experienced in recent decades (Ould S. Diddi, 2014: 122).

Civilian oversight is considered necessary in any democratic state, and there is often no democratic rule without civilian oversight of the military.

This requires that the military budget be controlled and submitted to the Parliament as a civil defense minister, and that the military be kept out of the government. The armed forces are subject to executive authority to promote civil-military relations and respect for human rights. The lack of oversight and accountability of state institutions within the political system is one of the most prominent effects hindering political change and reform in the country. The nature of the legislature is to provide civilian oversight of the military, monitoring the policies and actions of the military and the president as commander-in-chief of the military. The reason for the weakness of the parliament is the lack of parliamentary oversight of the military institution. One of the most important parliamentary functions, which seems to be almost non-existent in Mauritania, is to discuss laws related to defense and to monitor the military budget. Without this, it is difficult to predict the movements of the army and to control the armed forces.

Because accountability protects the political system from chaos and corruption, the presence of accountability reduces the role of the army in politics and reduces the incidence of military coups. This vacuum in civilian oversight may have facilitated the military's seizure of power and increased the army's chances of dominating political life in Mauritania. Weaknesses in oversight may be due to the strength and breadth of the military structure, the independence of the military institution, and the support of the civilian side of the situation. Transparency and accountability usually fail in the face of fanaticism that protects the corrupt. The absence of oversight and accountability is what prevents the completion of the transition and the consolidation of the democratic system in the country.

The last paragraph of article 68 (new) of the Mauritanian Constitution stipulates that the Court of Accounts is responsible for auditing public finances. With regard to political responsibility, articles 74 and 75 of the Mauritanian Constitution stipulate that the Government is accountable to the National Assembly. In the case of the National Assembly, the political responsibility of the Government derives from the question of confidence and the motion of censure.

Within Parliament, there are commissions of inquiry or control, but they are rarely used and have not made any significant effort to monitor the government and the state's financial policies.

It is essential that these defense-related parliamentary committees and their staffs include the main actors, since they exercise the real civilian oversight and also serve as the locus of military expertise. Therefore, the State must promote the acquisition of civilian knowledge in defense matters, since the provision of

this type of knowledge enables the Parliament to become a competent and knowledgeable supervisor of the armed forces. The executive and legislative branches of government must share exclusive financial responsibility for military expenditures, and the armed forces must be kept out of politics and their members must not be allowed to play any political role other than exercising their civic right to vote (Barany, Zoltan and Moser Robert, 2012: 279).

Since the arrival of the current president, the prices of raw materials and food have risen, and this crisis came in the form of covid due to international circumstances, the Ukrainian crisis, and other economic factors. This current system has many flaws, including rotating spoilers, but it still occasionally tries to build something for the future.

President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani's recent (December 2021) changes to the military establishment reorganized the military establishment after some senior officers took advantage of their right to retire. The changes affected the army staff and the customs sector. President Ghazouani's decision was based on a calculation of the interests of the military establishment.

The country needs security reforms within the military establishment that reduce tensions in civil-military relations and the entry of former generals into political life. Military reform must be accompanied by effective civilian oversight and include the security sector in order to increase citizen confidence in the military and strengthen the country's democracy. To democratize the military institution, the armed forces must be educated, the armed forces must be subject to legal oversight and accountability before the legislature, and the parliament must monitor the Ministry of Defense to ensure that state funds are properly spent. This is the role of the free press and parliament in holding leaders accountable and monitoring the army's budget in order to complete the transition to democracy and consolidate the rule of law.

"Without oversight and accountability, economic growth and military modernization will eventually grind to a halt" (Boukhras 2016).

I believe that the time has come for civilians to take charge of civil-military relations, to build a true democracy and to transform Mauritanian politics for the future. This stage also requires a break with the traditional tribal and ethnic structures of Mauritanian society and with traditional practices that contradict the foundations and values of the civil state.

To democratize the army and strengthen democracy in the country in the long term, the political system must intervene in the process of training and educating the armed forces to uphold certain democratic values and establish a military doctrine (Bishara, Azmi, 2017).

The army's support for the democratic system at this stage is essential to the success of democracy in the country, and civilian political control over the army can only be achieved after the transfer of power from the army to an elected democratic civilian government, the existence of a measure of political stability, and an undivided party system (Mady, A. Fettah, 2019).

This goal could be achieved with the emergence of a new group that aims to build political institutions and clean the house of corruption. If the new political forces are willing and do not use the political system to acquire wealth, distribute high positions and exploit power to achieve their own interests, then the country can reform the political system. It establishes good governance and is based on democratic values and human rights.

However, parliaments and the legislative power must play their role in controlling the government. The presence of a genuine opposition in Parliament is a guarantee that will increase the effectiveness of the legislative institution in drafting laws and serving the interests of the people. The State must also play a major role in establishing partnerships between the State, civil society organizations and the private sector.

All this cooperation requires the participation of all these parties in order to achieve a democratic transition in Mauritania.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the above, there appears to be an urgent need to study military and security issues in Mauritania in order to support military transition and reform, and to expose the extent of corruption within the military institution. It can be said that, despite the challenges and the long period of reform, the democratic choice and the construction of a state based on the rule of law are irreversible. But this will not happen if the rest of the democratic process in Mauritania is trapped by the military establishment. State building under the rule of law will only be achieved if civilians control military affairs and other state institutions and do not allow the military to interfere in elections, or if a civilian president comes to power in a fair and transparent manner that is not supported by the military and the civilian power industry, or if the military stops interfering in politics. Then we can talk about the country's democratic political system. It now appears that Mauritania's chances of a successful democratic transition are greater than before if competitive elections are held, unlike the past period of military and autocratic regimes that ruled and did not allow any kind of serious competition. The following table lists: The names of the presidents of Mauritania from independence until today, indicating the way they came to power.

<b>Name of the President</b>	<b>Path to power/change</b>
President Mokhtar Ould Daddah 1960-1978.	Multiparty elections 1959.
Mustafa Ould Mohamed Salek 1978-1979.	Military coup.
Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Ahmed Louli 1979-1980.	Military struggle for power.
Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla 1980-1984.	Military struggle for power.
Muawia Ould Sid Ahmed Taya 1984-2005.	Military coup in December 1984, then popularly elected in 1992, 1997 and 2003.
Ely Ould Mohamed Vall 2005-2007.	Military coup of August 3, 2005.
Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallah 2007-2008.	Multiparty presidential elections in 2007, Mauritania's first elected civilian president.
Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz 2009-2019.	Military coup in 2008. He was then elected twice, in 2009 and 2014.
Mohamed Ould Cheikh Al-Ghazouani 2019.	Multiparty Presidential Election 2019.

**Source : Prepared by the researcher.**

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