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PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AS A FORM OF LEGITIMIZATION OF POWER AFTER COUPS D'ÉTAT: MAURITANIA CASE STUDY

Abstract

The paper analyses the significance of holding presidential elections as a form of legitimization of power after staging a coup d'état, on the example of Mauritania. The intention of the author is to use the analysis of three cases of presidential elections held after coups d'état – in 2003, 2007 and 2009 – for explaining that the presidential elections not only represent a suitable manner for legitimizing power and justifying coups d'état by the military junta, but also a good system for strengthening political position and the institution of the president in the eyes of the public after a failed attempt of staging a coup. With the use of method of analysis of electoral process and the results of the elections themselves, the author will show that holding presidential elections actually represents the most significant part of staging a coup, by which the seizure or keeping the power is legitimized: in the case of a successful coup d'état, it provides a “democratic” background to the violent change of power and thus makes it legal, while in the case of a failed attempt of a coup d'état, it stands in defense of the legitimacy of the rule of the current regime and sheds a negative light to the stagers of the coup d'état.

Keywords: *elections, electoral system, coup d'état, president, Mauritania, military junta.*

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the process of decolonization of the African nations, and throughout the third wave of democratization, the African continent has witnessed a constant political instability, as well as a series of unconstitutional changes of government in three different ways: through staging coups d'état, through tenure prolongation by introducing the option of the third term, and through refusal of defeated incumbents to concede power to the winning opposition, which often results in various forms of power-sharing arrangements (Omotola, 2011, p. 20). Even though the Lomé Declaration on the Framework for an OAU² Response to Unconstitutional Changes of Government, adopted in July 2000 (Omotola, 2011, p. 16), strictly forbids the previously listed actions, it is obvious that they still occasionally occur across the continent, of which most clearly speaks the case of the coup d'état staged in Mali during the summer of 2020. Mali itself has a fruitful political history filled with cases of coups, namely, three that preceded the most recent one, but still, the temporal proximity does not allow us to provide predictions of the political future of this country, and thus, the best solution for running possible scenarios would be to examine other historical cases and the outcomes of the said political solutions that followed the coups. Given the regional proximity, as well as the fact that Mauritania has witnessed three distinct cases of coups d'état with quite different outcomes, we have chosen this predominantly Muslim country as a case study that might provide us with an insight into the possible future which awaits Mali.

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is an African and Arab state which represents both a “dam” and a “bridge” between Maghreb and the sub-Saharan Africa, given that its geographical position both links and divides these two regions. Geographically speaking, it belongs to the Western African region, but it is also often found on the list of North African countries due to its cultural and linguistic links with the people of Maghreb. It borders with Algeria in the north-east, Western Sahara in the north-west, the Atlantic Ocean in the west,

² Organization of African Union.

Senegal in the south and Mali in the south-east. Having in mind that the majority of the country is covered by desert sand, half of its four million habitants inhabits the coastal area and the capital Nouakchott, while the rest lives in the vicinity of borders with Senegal and Mali. Moreover, a smaller part of its habitants of Bedouin origin live in the oases in the heart of the Sahara (CIA, 2020).

When speaking of the political system, Mauritania is a republic with a semi-presidential system³ modeled on the French system, which was expected, given the fact that this country is a former French colony, and that the semi-presidential system is often linked in the literature to the French Fifth Republic.⁴ It is characterized by the multi-party system since 1991, and until 2017, it was also characterized by the bicameral legislature. However, that year, the referendum abolished the Senate, leaving the legislature in the hands of the National Assembly. The president is chosen for the period of five years, as is the case in Mali as well, with the right of participating in the government in two terms. Moreover, given the fact that the medieval and pre-colonial African states were most often ruled by the wise, aged men, an age limit was also set, prescribing that a president might be up to seventy-five years old (Gerteiny, 2019). When speaking of the political process in Mauritania, it should be also noted that all individuals over the age of eighteen hold the right to vote, which is also the lower limit for participating in the government. Moreover, even though a traditional Muslim country, Mauritania follows the trends determined by the laws of modern democracy, which is depicted in the fact that the Decree passed in 2006 defined that one fifth of governmental functions should be filled by women, even though the said goal has yet to be reached (Gerteiny, 2019).

As stated by Orlović, the term *semi-presidential system* was coined in the political theory for the first time by Maurice Duverger in his work published in

³ Since becoming independent in 1960 up until the removal of the president Moktar Ould Daddah by a coup d'état in 1978, Mauritania organized the government in the form of a presidential system.

⁴ Semi-presidential system is very popular in African states, given that out of 53 member-states of the African Union, a total of 27 of them have currently, or in the recent past, organized the government in such a way. See more in: Eglie R., Moestrup S., & Wu Y. (2011). *Semi-Presidentialism and Democracy*. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 147.

1980 named *A New Political System Model: Semi-Presidential Government* (Orlović, 2015, p.152). Further determination of semi-presidential systems can be found in the work of Shugart and Carey (Shugart & Carey, 1992, pp.18-27), who state that such type of governmental system should best be described by the term *premier-presidentialism*, which implies the primacy of the prime minister, or by the term *presidential-parliamentary dichotomy*, implying the primacy of the president and the government's dependence of the parliament (Orlović, 2015, pp. 152-153). When speaking of Mauritania, we would rather use the latter term used by Shugart and Carey, given the fact that the president is the most significant personality within the political scene of the said country.

According to Slaviša Orlović, “the semi-presidential system is a system with dual executive in which both president and the premier have the decision-making power” (Orlović, 2015, p.153). By analyzing the polity and the dynamics of behavior of political individuals in the state, it is clearly noted that the polity of Mauritania completely fits the presented model, especially if having in mind the features given to the semi-presidential system by Giovanni Sartori, which are the following: 1) the president is being chosen by the people in an election, for a previously defined period of time; 2) the head of the state shares executive power with the prime minister, which leads to formation of dual power; 3) the president is independent from the parliament, but he does not govern directly, and all of the directives of the president must be adopted by the government; 4) the prime minister and the cabinet of the prime minister are independent from the president, but are in a dependent relation with the parliament; and 5) the structure of dual power of the semi-presidential system allows different balances and variable supremacy within the executive. Thus, it might be said that the mixed system of government is never a pure form (Sartori, 1994, p. 132). On the other hand, Duverger lists the following three key features of the semi-presidential system: 1) the president of the republic is being elected in direct elections; 2) the president of the republic has “substantial powers”; and 3) the prime minister and the ministers (the government) depend on the majority of the parliament (Orlović, 2015, p. 154).

There are several reasons due to which the polity of Mauritania is modelled in such a way. Above all, as previously stated, the semi-presidential system is the bequest of the French colonial influence – France treated Mauritania as its colony from 1903 to 1960, which is a long enough period during which one could leave a strong mark on the people and the state which, after the departure of the French, kept the said polity as the “spoils of war”, taken from their colonizers.⁵ On the other hand, as noted by Sartori, the majority of states which practice the semi-presidential system were previously monarchies in which, besides the institution of the monarch, co-existed the institution of the prime minister (Sartori, 199, pp. 85-86). Before the arrival of the French, Mauritania by all means did not have a defined political system, especially due to the fact that the majority of its territory consists of the Sahara, and that the said country was ruled by the tribal leaders, mostly of Bedouin origin. Moreover, “the systems with dual executive are established in the states which won their independence from other countries or the ones with the dominating power, and are seen as a symbol of the new nation” (Orlović, 2015, p. 154) which, having in mind the French influence in the region, can completely be applied on the case of the country in question. Thus, all the previously noted characteristics linked to introduction of the semi-presidential system are valid in the case of Mauritania.

However, what makes Mauritania a country with a special semi-presidential system is the fact that the two key institutions within this system represent the typical example of a dysfunctional civil-military government, where the president, by an unwritten rule, usually originated from the ranks of the armed forces, while the position of the prime minister was filled by individuals from the ranks of civilians, with an exception of the periods of the biggest crises in the state, as well as the periods following the coups d'état, when the said position was filled by military officers. However, it is important noting that the practice of appointing officers on the position of the prime minister was valid until 1984,

⁵ Another “spoils of war” kept by the Mauritanian people is the French language, which is still the most influential foreign language in the country, even though Arabic was proclaimed to be the national language a long time ago.

when the last individual originating from the military ranks filled this position. Afterwards, the prime ministers always originated from the civil ranks.

Regarding the term “dysfunctional” used when determining the state of the civil-military government, or in this case, military-civil government, it is important noting that, in Mauritania, the prime ministers themselves never had real power, and were quite removable. Moreover, the prime minister was always appointed by the president, which also enabled the said individual to be easily removed from power. Thus, the said military-civil government deserves to be characterized as dysfunctional, and even almost inexistent, given that it represents only an illusion of democratic organization of the state.

Out of a total of eleven presidents and acting presidents, only three of them were civilians. The first of them, the first democratically elected president Moktar Ould Daddah, was overthrown in a coup after seventeen years of being in power, while the other two, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and Ba Mamadou Mbaré, remained in power for a short period of time. The former was a sort of an experiment of the military junta and an attempt of returning the power into the hands of the civilians, and the latter was only an acting president during the rule of the military junta led by Muhammad Ould Abdel Aziz (Rao, 2014, p.11). On the other hand, out of nineteen prime ministers, only four of them originated from the military ranks, holding the said position within several different governments and usually in the times following the coup. Also, out of four officers which served as prime ministers, two of them – Mohammed Khouna Ould Haidalla and Maaouya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya, would later also serve as presidents (See Table 1). Given the previously mentioned examples, it might be concluded that during the course of history of Mauritania, all the power was, in the majority of times, in the hands of a president originating from the military ranks, while the position of the prime minister was never a significant role when speaking of functioning of the state.

Table 1.

Chronological timeline of presidents and prime ministers of Mauritania, since the independence until today, with bolded names of the individuals originating from the military ranks.⁶

Timeframe	President	Prime minister
1961-1978	Moktar Ould Daddah (overthrown in a coup)	Moktar Ould Daddah
1979-1979	Mustafa Ould Salek (coup leader)	Ahmed Ould Bouceif (for a month; died in a plane crash) Ahmed Salim Ould Sidi (temporary prime minister) Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla
1979-1980	Muhamed Mahmoud Ould Louly (removed)	Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla
1980-1984	Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla (overthrown in a coup)	Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla Sid Ahmed Ould Bnejara (an attempt of setting a civilian-military government) Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya (coup leader) Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla
1984-2005	Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya (coup leader; overthrown in a coup)	Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar Cheikh El Avia Ould Mohamed Khouna Muhamed Lemine Ould Guig Cheikh El Avia Ould Mohamed Khouna Sghair Ould M'Bareck (appointed after a failed coup)
(2005-2007 – Transitional Military Council)	Ely Ould Mohamed Vall	Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar
2007-2008	Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi (smenjen pučem)	Zeine Ould Zeidane Yahya Ould Ahmed El Waghef

2008-2009	Muhamed Ould Abdel Aziz	Moulaye Ould Mohamed Laghdaf
2009	Ba Mamadou Mbaré (acting president)	Moulaye Ould Mohamed Laghdaf
2009-2019	Muhamed Ould Abdel Aziz	Mulaje Uld Muhamed Lardaf Yahya Ould Hademine Mohamed Salem Ould Béchir
2019 - ongoing	Mohamed Ould Ghazouani	Mohamed Salem Ould Béchir Ismail Ould Bedde Ould Cheikh Sidiya Mohamed Ould Bilal ⁷

Even though one could see from the presented timeline that the power in Mauritania was most often gained in a non-democratic and violent manner, it is worth noting the fact that the presidential elections held in 2007 are often called the first democratic elections, held two years after the coup. However, as it will be explained later, the “democratic pattern” will not be adopted in Mauritania at that time, given that Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi will be removed in a coup only one year into his term. Such development of the situation points to the fact that Mauritania and the Mauritanian people easily accept the leadership of officers, and also have difficulties choosing their presidents from the civil ranks, which will later be represented in the analysis of the results of the elections held in 2007.

The first “true” example of a democratic change of government was in fact recorded in 2019, when Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz willingly stepped down from power after the termination of his second five-year term in office, and suggested Mohamed Ould Ghazouani as his *de facto* successor⁸. The potent militaristic history of Mauritania ensured the win in the elections for Ghazouani, by which continued the enchanted circle of military rule in this country. However, not

⁷ Appointed on August 6 2020, after the previous prime minister Ismail Ould Cheikh Sidiya resigned with his entire government due to an investigation into alleged high-level corruption. See more in: Ramadan, Ibrahim. (2020). Mauritania’s president names new premier. Available at: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/mauritania-s-president-names-new-premier/1933624>; [Accessed 09 September 2020].

⁸ It is worth mentioning that the current president participated in staging a coup in 2008.

even in this case can we speak of the pure democratic practice, given the fact that the change of power between Abdel Aziz and Ghazouani resembles the monarchist succession on the throne, with the approval of the people. Thus, Mauritania might be most clearly defined as a militarized semi-presidential system in which the institution of military presidents is quite stable, while the institution of the prime minister is unstable and of a lesser significance in comparison with the institution of the president.

COUPS IN MAURITANIA

The history of Mauritania was marked by four successfully staged coups, and two failed coups (in 1981 and 2003). Having in mind that, for fulfilling the goal of this paper, the best solution would be to analyze the incident of a failed coup in 2003, after which presidential elections were held, as well as the coups staged in 2005 and 2008, which initially had two different outcomes – the former was followed by elections won by a member of the military junta, and the latter representing an unsuccessful attempt of passing the power into civilian hands. The older instances of military coups, staged in 1978 and 1984, will only be presented for clarification and rightful representation of the political and security situation in the country, as well as the political situation which follows the “putschist climate” of Mauritania.

However, before we step into deeper examination of the previously mentioned incidents, it is necessary defining and describing the institution most often used by the coup leaders for enforcing their power, and which is most often called *The Transitional Military Council*, with occasional variations in the title.⁹ The term *military junta* is most often linked to Latin America. The word *junta* itself is of Spanish origin, and represents the term used for naming a coalition or a group of people that overthrew the government in a joint action. In the case when the perpetrators of the said action come from the army, the term *junta*

⁹ For example, in the most recent Malian case, the power was seized by a military body entitled *National Committee for the Salvation of the People*.

is additionally determined with the adjective *military*, as is the case with the examples from the history of Mauritania. Davidonis defines the military government as a government which is “established and maintained by a belligerent by force of arms over occupied territory of the enemy and over the inhabitants thereof“, and “a government imposed by force”, whilst “the legality of its acts is determined by the laws of war” (Davidonis, 1944, p. 460).

As the main feature of the military junta, Welch names the intention of the junta to return “power to civilians after an unspecified period of *cleansing*” (Welch, 1978, p. 139). However, it is a quite rare case that the military junta in fact really returns the power to the civilians, but, most often, after a certain period of time which, in most cases, lasts for two to three years, organizes presidential elections which are, almost as a rule, won by a candidate from the military ranks, and most often the leader of the said Transitional Military Council. Regarding this, at this point, it is important noting that in the majority of cases, it is quite difficult to put a stop to the rule of a military junta, and thus, the removal of the putschists is most often being performed by staging a new coup. Moreover, even in the cases when the military junta decides to release the power into the civilian hands, as we will see in the case of Mauritania, there is a great chance that the newly elected president from the civilian ranks will soon enough be violently overthrown, with participation with the armed forces. From all the previously stated, it can be concluded that, what a certain country once steps into the “putschist climate”, it struggles to come out of it, which leads to a long-term influence of the armed forces on the political changes and processes in the country.

Namely, the first coup in Mauritania was staged in 1978 against the first president of Mauritania, Moktar Ould Daddah, when the power was taken by the military junta embodied in the form of a military institution named *The Military Committee for National Recovery* (fr. *Comité Militaire de Redressement National*) (Garcia, n.d.). As stated by ‘Uld Muhammad, the first coup in the history of Mauritania was staged under the justification that the system has become impotent, that the security in the country was inexistent, and that the

majority of habitants has escaped into the border regions, most of them towards the border with Senegal and Mali (‘Uld Muhammad, 2013).

Daddah is definitely not considered as a democratically elected president of that country due to the fact that he was appointed to the said position by the French colonial power, after which he formed the Government of National Unity, uniting four most prominent parties from the period preceding the decolonization into the *Mauritanian Regroupment Party*¹⁰, thus directing the country towards one-party rule. It was first planned that Mauritania should adopt the “French model” of polity, so that Daddah should appoint a suitable individual besides him to the position of the prime minister. However, such development of the situation never happened, due to his evidently strong desire for power and full control over the nation of that country. Mauritania officially sailed into the one-party rule and the authoritarian presidential system in 1964, when the Constitution stipulated that Daddah would at the same time perform as the President and the prime minister. Daddah justified such move with a fact that Mauritania is still not ready for the Western model of polity, and in such way remained in power until he was overthrown by a coup in 1978. The idea of a coup materialized after the Mauritanian military intervention in Western Sahara, with the goal of annexing a part of Western Saharan territory, which led to appointment of Mohamed Ould Salek to the position of the minister of defense in 1976. With the militarization of the institution of the minister of defense, the road was set towards staging a coup two years later. All the same, the coup and the leadership of the military junta will result with withdrawal of Mauritania from the war in Western Sahara the following 1979, by which the will of the people would be fulfilled, and the belief and trust in the armed forces redeemed. The same year, Mauritania recognized the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (Melly, 2019).

The last prime minister in the government of the Mohamed Ould Salek, Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla, will the following year of 1980 take over the

¹⁰ Daddah won the respect and the trust of France as a departing ex colonial power due to the fact that he succeeded in uniting three ethnic groups in Mauritania – the black Moors, the white Moors, and Africans originating from former slaves – under one political roof.

power from Mohamed Ould Louly, but his rule will last for only four years, until the coup was staged against him in 1984. His successor, Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, led a coup as a prime minister, at which position he was appointed after a failed coup in 1981. Leadership of general Ould Taya was marked with efforts of the ruling junta to start the democratization process by organizing presidential elections and appointing civilians on significant state positions, but the authority of the institution of the president was quite weakened by interethnic conflicts and discrimination of citizens of *Black African* origin ('Uld Muhammad, 2013).

Ould Taya remained in power until 2005, when he was deposed in a coup. It is important noting that this successfully staged coup was in fact the second attempt of violent overthrow of general Ould Taya conducted by members of the armed forces, given that, in 2003, major Saleh Ould Hannena, as a leader of the rebel group, attempted to seize power over the capital Nouakchott. Moreover, it is worth mentioning in this point that the said failed coup was staged only a few months before the scheduled presidential elections, on which Ould Taya won the majority of votes and thus legitimized his stay in power, which will be discussed later. However, only two years later, the chief of the National Police, Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, took advantage of the president's absence¹¹ from the country and staged a successful coup. From the mere moment of seizure of power, Vall stressed that he does not wish to bear the title of the President, given that the said title is reserved for individuals chosen by the majority of people, and thus, the two years that followed his seizure of power, that is, until the presidential elections of 2007, he only acted as the President of the ruling Military Council for Justice and Democracy.

At the time of writing this paper, the last Mauritanian coup was staged against the institution of a president elected in democratic presidential elections of 2007, when the civilian president Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was deposed by a group of generals in 2008 (Bensaid, 2019). As reasons for his deposition, many have listed the fact that the president became too close with the *ulama*,

¹¹ At that time, the president was attending the funeral of King Fahd in Saudi Arabia.

as well as that he pardoned certain militant elements and released them from prison as well. Moreover, a key element as well is the fact that Adballahi did not include members of the opposition in the new government.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AFTER STAGING A COUP: CASE STUDIES OF ELECTIONS HELD IN 2003, 2007 AND 2009

Before we step into analysis of available information on presidential elections held in 2003, 2007 and 2009, we will provide a short presentation of the significance of holding presidential elections in countries with a pronounced “putschist climate”. As stated by Orlović, “direct election is an important source of power, but above all, the legitimacy of the president” (Orlović, 2015, p. 156). On the other hand, presidential election stresses the will of people, given that they provide the habitants of the said country with an opportunity to choose the political climate they wish to live in. Voting, thus, “as a form of expressing the will of voters towards certain candidates and lists, also represents one of the fundamental components of electoral systems” (Đukanović, 2006, p. 514).

Since the introduction of multipartyism, presidential elections in Mauritania gained significance. However, it is clear that this state, which is yet to make the first steps towards establishing true rule of democracy, in fact does not have a clearly regulated electoral system. The analysis of previously held elections in the country enables us to define the electoral system as the majoritarian electoral system. “The majoritarian electoral model contributes to the fact that “the winner takes it all”, whether with relative or absolute majority, or even within one-round or two-round elections” (Đukanović, 2006, p. 514). In the electoral history of Mauritania, there are numerous cases when the winning candidate, usually from the military ranks, won the majority of votes in the first round of elections, while the case of holding both rounds of elections occurred only once – on the occasion of the unfortunate attempt of the military junta to pass the power into the hands of a civilian, in 2007.

We might say that the coup has always been a strong tool for taking power in Mauritania, but that the direct election of the leader was still needed for legitimizing the government and the institution of the president. Taking power by force, and especially with participation of members of the armed forces, provides the newly appointed president of the country or the Military Transitional Council with power, but a putschist will gain legitimacy only after organizing presidential elections and winning power in a democratic manner. In this moment, it is interesting comparing the functioning of the presidential and the semi-presidential system in countries that are deemed as “suitable climates” for staging a coup.

The presidential system itself concentrates the power in the hands of one man – the president of the country, while other actors have lesser, or even no power in the country. Having in mind that the mere existence of the military government in a country points towards the existence of an authoritarian regime, in such cases, military juntas most often choose semi-presidential systems as the most suitable system for future organization of the state, and for several reasons. Above all, the coup itself is being staged by a group, and not by a single person, even though the leader of the coup often arises as the most prominent political figure and the most suitable future leader of the nation, and thus, the president of the country. On the other hand, semi-presidential system allows creation of an illusion of democratization by appointing civilians on the position of prime minister, whilst the holders of the said position, in majority of cases, do not really hold any real power in their hands. Much the same, it is important noting that staging a coup has another function, that is, transformation of military officers into politicians, and thus into acting civilian officials in the state (Muhammad, n.d.), at which point the line between the military and the civilians is blurred.

The problem most often faced by the leaders originating from military ranks is the so-called “third term” problem which is, at the same time, also one of the biggest challenges faced by presidents in presidential and semi-presidential systems (Orlović, 2015, pp. 158-159). Having in mind that the majority

of countries world-wide, and Mauritania as well, have Constitutions which stipulate a possibility of one reelection of president after the expiration of the first term in office, set at five years in this country, it is clear that military personalities often do not wish to give up their position after expiration of their two-term limit, that is, after a decade in power. Moreover, the second term itself is quite critical, since the nation has the possibility to disobey the president and choose a civilian candidate in presidential elections. The leaders of military juntas most often solve such scenarios by introducing the one-party rule and arresting opposition candidates. However, all the same, if a candidate from the civilian ranks raises to power, such scenario very often culminates into a brand-new coup, and thus the military junta returns only to prolong the unstable political situation in the country.

The history of electoral system of Mauritania is very interesting for research, having in mind that, in the first presidential elections held on August 20, 1961, only one candidate of the colonial power had the right to compete. The individual in question was Moktar Ould Daddah, who then held the position of the prime minister. The change from one-party rule to multipartyism was noted only thirty years later. In the presidential elections held on January 24, 1992, the following individuals participated: the president of the Military Transitional Council Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, who ruled the country since 1984 until the date of the elections, and who won reelection with a total of 62,89% votes; Akhmed Ould Daddah, half-brother of the first president of Mauritania Moktar Ould Dadda, who won a total of 32,88% votes; Mostafa Ould Salek, the first coup leader in the history of Mauritania (won a total of 2,86% votes); and Mohammad Ould Mah (1,37%). From that moment now on, there is an ever-increasing number of candidates at presidential elections, which indicates an increasing level of democratization in the country (African Elections Database, n.d.).

The first presidential elections of significance for conducting research in political behavior after staging a coup were held on November 07, 2003, six months after a group of officers, led by major Saleh Ould Hannena, attempted to seize

power over the capital Nouakchott in the night of June 07. The government of the president Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya succeeded in repelling the attack of the putschists who were soon arrested in order for the state to quickly stabilize the crisis situation and quickly ensure the people that the institution of the president is secured. However, even a failed coup succeeded in destabilizing the rule of Taya, and thus, the previously scheduled elections were in fact the real test of legitimacy of Taya's rule, having in mind that the president did not enjoy respect and support of all members of the armed forces. Thus, on November 07, 2003, the president Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya won a total of 67,38% of votes and thus excluded the possibility of holding second turn of elections. At the same time, he showed the nation and the world that he is the legitimate leader of Mauritania. Besides him, the following candidates also participated in the elections: Mohamed Ould Khouna Haidalla (18,77%), Ahmed Ould Daddah (6,89%), Messaoud Ould Boulkheir (5,01%), Moulaye El Hacem Ould Jeid (1,49%) and Aïcha Mint Jeddane (0,46%), the first female presidential candidate in Mauritania (African Elections Database, n.d.).

Regarding the example of presidential elections held in 2003 in Mauritania, it can clearly be concluded that the ruling elite used presidential elections after such "attacks" on the institution of the president for legitimizing their stay in power in case they win the elections. Namely, in this case, led by the idea that there is a growing dissatisfaction regarding his leadership style, Taya gave people the freedom to decide on his political fate. The belief in the nation resulted in confirmation of trust in Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya as the president of Mauritania.

The second case of Mauritanian elections worthy of our attention within this topic are the two-round elections held of March 11 and March 25, 2007, the first elections held after the coup staged in 2005 and the two-year rule of the Military Transitional Council led by Ely Ould Mohamed Vall. At this moment, it is important stressing that the president of the Military Transitional Council did not run as a candidate in those elections because he believed that the role of the army is to protect, and not to govern the country, and that the president

should be elected from the civilian ranks. Thus, in the first round of the elections, held on March 11, a total of 20 candidates participated, whilst the first and second runners, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and Ahmed Ould Daddah, took 24,80% and 20,69% of votes. In the next round, held on March 25, Abdallahi won 52,85% of votes, while Daddah won 47,15%. However, Abdallahi's rule did not last long – in the year that followed, he was overthrown in a coup. The reason for his overthrow might be found in his slim win, in the fact that Mauritania was for a long period of time led by army men, and that this “civilian experiment” was not well accepted among the armed forces, so that Abdallahi needed the second round of elections for winning, and so on.

The elections held in 2009 are also significant for this study, given that they were won in the first round by the leader of the re-established Military Transitional Council, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. Abdel Aziz is significant for the study of political history of Mauritania for several reasons. Above all, as a representative of the armed forces, he won 52,54% of votes in the presidential elections held on July 18, 2009, and thus outran the rest ten candidates, of which the second-running, Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, won a total of 16,25% of votes (CENI, 2014).¹² Secondly, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz would afterwards be the president of Mauritania for an entire decade, only to retire from office after his second term expired, without seeking a third term or prolongation of his rule in any other way.

The previous year of 2019 was thus, in the political history of Mauritania, defined as the first occurrence of a “democratic change” of power in the country. In elections held on June 26, a total of six candidates participated, of which four independent candidates and two as representatives of the most prominent parties in the country – representative of the ruling party, the Union for the Republic, Muhamed Ould Ghazouani¹³, and the president of the Union of

¹² He also won the second term in presidential elections in 2014 by winning 81,8% of votes.

¹³ Muhamed Ould Ghazouani won the elections as the candidate proposed by the former president, which inclined opposition parties to announce that the elections were “just another coup” or “the continuance of a coup”. Such attitude is justified not only by the fact that Ould Ghazouani was a member of the ruling party, but also that he is a retired military officer. During his military

Progressive Forces (UPF) party, Muhamed Ould Mouloud. Ghazouani won 52,01% of votes and thus avoided the second round of elections. However, having previously stated information in mind, we can concur that the rule of Ghazouani, chosen by the military top, represents the continued rule of the military juntas in Mauritania, and not a truly democratic change.

CONCLUSION

There are several conclusions to be drawn from the provided examples of presidential elections after successfully staged or failed coups. First of all, it is crystal clear that the presidential elections definitely serve the purpose of legitimizing the power, but as well that the ruling elites use them in one way after a failed coup, in comparison with their use by the military juntas after a successfully staged coup. After a failed coup, the presidential elections provide the current government with legitimacy by justifying the survival of the president in power and denouncing the existence of possibility that the power should be transferred into the hands of the rebelling group of military officers. On the contrary, after a successful coup, the military junta organizes elections in order to provide not only legitimacy to the officer predestined to take the lead in the country, but also legality, given that taking power by staging a coup is defined as illegal and unconstitutional.

On the other hand, when analyzing the democratic presidential elections of 2007 and the lack of candidates from the military on the list of candidates, one could notice the fact that, after a coup has occurred in a country, the best success in the elections is often attributed to individuals originating from the army, and that in a militarized state such as Mauritania, a civilian representative can hardly survive in power for a longer period of time. This is proven by the fact that the candidate from the civil ranks was deposed by a new coup only one year after his presidential inauguration.

career, Ould Ghazouani was chief of the Mauritanian intelligence service, as well as the Chief of Staff. Before running for president, he was performing the duty of the minister of defense.

Another example of the putschist practice regarding holding elections from which we can draw conclusions about their significance are the elections held in 2009, which were won by the president of the Military Transitional Council Muhamed Ould Abdel Aziz who, in the later days, left a deep mark in the political history of Mauritania. Abdel Aziz represents a classical example of the influence a charismatic military leader might have on the public opinion, which helped him gain support from the broad masses, given that he willingly stepped down from power after completing his second term in office, as stipulated in the Constitution of Mauritania.

In the end, the last example of presidential elections, held in 2019, stresses the fact that Mauritania might be ready to “color inside the lines” of democratic behavior and reduce the reign of a president to two terms, without seeking the third one, but it is still not democratically adjusted enough in order for power to be passed to the hands of civilians. Thus, the future of Mauritania as a potentially democratic state will remain colored with “camouflage colors”, at least for the next few years, and if the said term is not cut short by a rebel group of officers who would organize a mutiny, followed by a coup against the president. However, given that Muhamed Ould Ghazouani is a candidate chosen by the previous president, and that he was always respected by the people, the army and the countries of the region, such occurrence is not quite likely.

Many decades of tradition of militarized semi-presidential system in Mauritania do not allow appointment of civilians to the highest state function due to the fact that the state itself, as well as its people, in the end, are not acquainted with the concept of civilian rule, and the fact that the concept of an illusion of a military-civilian government fulfils the lowest criteria for Mauritania to be perceived as a somewhat democratic state, though only by African standards. Moreover, the root of militarization of power might also be searched for in the traditional tribal rule present in African and Arab states, given that Mauritania belongs to both categories, which glorify the cult of warriors. For that reason, transition from military to civilian power is not foreseen in the recent future, but still remains far away, somewhere on the horizon of the Atlantic Ocean.

As for the future of Mali, another West African country caught up in the putschist climate, the future is yet to be seen. The current situation points to the fact that the military junta, for the time being, is there to stay, that is, it has taken up the role of the “political policeman” with the goal of restoring the peace and “the rule of civil rights” to the country. As a response to the irresponsible governing of the ousted president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, members of the military junta resorted to forcing Keita to resign and thus stopped his attempt to remain in power and serve a third term as the president of this country. Now, Mali has stepped into the next chapter of its political history that will last for the following year and a half, only to step into the constitutional order after holding democratic elections, expected to be held in April 2022. How, the question that lingers is the following: will the transitional government, led by the members of the junta, truly turn to democracy and organize just elections and pass the power into the hands of the civilians, or are we set to see this almost failed state turn into a new autocracy in the Western African region? The experience of Mauritania, as presented in this paper, points to a gloomy future, with many years of military leadership to come, given that, even under the disguise of civilian rule, the army still continuously finds its way into the presidential office.

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ПРЕДСЕДНИЧКИ ИЗБОРИ КАО НАЧИН ЛЕГИТИМИЗАЦИЈЕ ВЛАСТИ НАКОН ПУЧА: СТУДИЈА СЛУЧАЈА МАУРИТАНИЈЕ

Апстракт

Узевши у обзир ревитализацију феномена насилне смене власти уз учешће оружаних снага, то јест, извођењем пуча, циљ овог рада јесте пружање анализе значаја организовања председничких избора као вид легитимизације власти након спровођења пуча, на примеру Мауританије, водећи се ставом да се анализом сличних инцидента у прошлости могу дати ваљана предвиђања развоја ситуације у будућности. Имајући у виду текуће устоличење пучистичке транзиционе владе у Малију, намера ауторке јесте да кроз анализу три случаја организовања председничких избора након спровођења пуча у суседној Мауританији – 2003., 2007. и 2009. године – прикаже могуће сценарије развоја политичко-безбедносне ситуације у земљама региона након извођења пучева. Идеја ауторке заснива се на хипотези да су председнички избори не само погодан начин за легитимизацију власти и оправдање пуча од стране војне хунте, већ такође могу бити и добар систем јачања политичке позиције и институције председника у очима јавности након неуспелог пуча. Методом анализе изборног процеса и исхода избора, ауторка ће приказати да је одржавање председничких избора заправо најбитнији део процеса спровођења пуча, којим се легитимизује преузимање или задржавање власти: у случају успешног пуча, даје „демократску“ позадину насилној смени власти и тиме је чини легалном, док у случају неуспешног спровођења пуча стаје у одбрану легитимитета владавине тренутног режима и баца негативно светло на пучисте.

Кључне речи: *избори, изборни систем, пуч, председник, Мауританија, војна хунта.*

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