

Famine and Democracy in Mauritania

Mauritania's military and the international community are at loggerheads over the recent coup in this Sahelian country. In response to the coup, Nouakchott's residents engaged in a joyful street celebration. Despite this sign of popular support for the new junta, foreign governments denounced the military's confiscation of political power.

Both the Mauritanian military and its international critics present themselves as champions of democracy, so these outwardly opposing sides are in fact interchangeable in regard to their mutual endorsement of an inaccurate explanation of this political crisis. President Taya held power for twenty-one years. The seventeen members of the ruling junta insist that Mauritania could no longer support his harsh rule, and they promise to set up democratic institutions by 2007. Foreign leaders, however, insist that the junta must respect the existing constitution and reinstall President Taya. The opposing sides offer different interpretations of the rule of law and fair electoral process, but they do not advance contrasting explanations either for the coup or for the popular support of it.

Though journalists and pundits do not give credence to arguments that the coup centres on the struggle for democracy, they too offer faulty analyses. In some cases, they conclude that an Islamic movement generated unrest in this North African country. This argument is based on Taya's decision to open diplomatic relations with Israel six years ago, which angered politicized Muslims. In other cases, they conclude that this coup represents an effort to control the resources of an emerging rentier state. This argument focuses on Taya's decision to eventually engage in offshore oil production. My criticism hinges on the chronological understanding of cause and effect. Both arguments look either to the past or to the future to explain the present crisis. And right now, today, in a country dependent on rain-fed agriculture, drought and locusts have destroyed its crops.

The Mauritanian coup builds upon the Sahel's long history of environmental crisis as a catalyst for political change. Taya himself organized a military coup in 1984, the third year of a severe drought. By that time, hungry nomads had set up shantytowns on the capital's outskirts, and their arrival doubled the Nouakchott's population. Mauritania is now in the second year of a similar food crisis, and the military, just as Taya and his cohorts once did, deposed a ruler who could not prevent famine. In this instance, the military's action sustains the environmental logic dictating this region's event history.

I worked at the US Embassy in Nouakchott in 1998, and I observed Taya's efforts to care for his country's marginalized masses. I came to Mauritania two months after a visit by the Under Secretary of State for Human Rights, who took this country off the US list of human rights abusers. When I travelled inland through Atar, I saw no evidence that Taya abused his power to enrich himself or his supporters. His hometown was just as run-down as other villages in the region. And Taya's government cared for displaced migrants. In showing me Nouakchott, an Embassy official drove a 4 X 4 along a network of paved roads that led to the shantytowns. As a public work, these roads allowed the capital's poorest residents to take buses downtown and to receive barrels of fresh water.

Though Taya's policies exhibited concern for the lot of ordinary people, his efforts to institute democracy were superficial. The first presidential election after Taya's coup

In August 2005, a military junta engaged in a bloodless coup in Mauritania that ousted President Maaouya Sid' Ahmed Ould Taya. Supporters and critics of this coup both explain this event in terms of a struggle for democracy. According to the author this analysis can neither explain the coup nor the popular support of it. Instead, she argues that environmental catastrophe has long acted as a catalyst for political change in Mauritania, just as in other countries in North Africa. Political instability in other countries will surely follow in the wake of more bad harvests.

took place in 1991, and the President was re-elected with an implausible 90% of the vote. In both 1997 and 2003, the incumbent's margin of victory was a more realistic percentage, but Taya jailed his principal opponent in the latter election. If Mauritania loathe authoritarianism and aspire instead to representative institutions, then a popularly supported military coup should have taken place well before August 2005.

It was only at the end of pitiful harvest season, as Mauritania faced a second year of poor crops, that military officers

ousted Taya. Even in the best of times, most people in this country hardly earn enough to feed their families. The US State Department estimates that the average annual income of the 2.5 million people in Mauritania remains close to only \$380 a year. Now, locusts and droughts have destroyed this region's crops, so food is costly or, even worse, unavailable. Only three days after the coup, the United Nations World Food Programme pointed to Mauritania as one country that has been most affected by the current environmental crisis in the Sahel. If there is one issue that obsesses most Mauritania right now, it is the cost and availability of staple food.

The reporting on this coup did not take into consideration the agricultural foundation of Mauritania's political life. At present, the UN estimates that famine threatens more than one million people in North and West Africa. Environmental catastrophe has long acted as a catalyst for political change in North Africa, and this coup perpetuates traditional patterns of power transfer in these arid lands. Ensuring public access to food is a basic task of any government, so famine in the Sahara's borderlands contributes to the rise and fall of empires. Political instability in other countries will surely follow in the wake of more bad harvests. But unmistakably, future demonstrators, much like the Mauritania who danced in the streets last August to celebrate the military coup, want food, not democracy.

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Distribution of food at a village nearby Nouakchott, 9 June 2002



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