Mauritania's coup must be reversed

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Commentary by

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Last August 6 happened to be a good day for a coup d'etat. Most international institutions were in a standby mode, with decision-makers out on their annual holidays and therefore difficult to reach. Moreover, the world media were focused on the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing on the other side of the globe.

Hopefully, this remains the only good calculation of the military leaders who on that date organized the coup in Mauritania that overthrew the regime of President Ould Abdallahi. History, however, is not on their side. Military takeovers have become a rare occurrence in Africa. The African Union swiftly condemned the action and demanded a return to constitutional government. Other international actors, including the Arab League, followed the same example. The international community should take measures to ensure that there is no hope for the Mauritanian military to receive a shred of recognition for what it has done.

Mauritania, ranked 137 out of 177 states in the United Nations Development Program's ranking on human development, has problems that soldiers cannot solve. Since the 2007 elections were held, rising food prices and energy costs have severely affected most Mauritanians. Growing government instability and unclear political leadership may have made the coup leaders think that their initiative would be welcomed. However, instead of solving one problem, the officers instead merely created another, namely overcoming international condemnation, which is now vital for Mauritania to overcome its current difficulties.

Military coups have been frequent in Mauritania's history, since the country's independence in 1960. However, in 2006 a new Constitution was adopted in a referendum, and was followed by local, parliamentary and presidential elections. This election cycle was judged democratic and credible by all international election observers present. The election commission, which supervised the process, and the Ministry of Interior, came in for special

praise from the observers for the way they managed the electoral operations. This, followed by the start of a long-awaited national reconciliation process, attracted much international attention and sympathy. The legal reforms laid the ground for a widening of political pluralism. Before the coup, the Mauritanian opposition benefited from an official status and the Parliament had started to play a genuine political role in managing the country's affairs.

Regardless of his performances as head of state, President Ould Abdallahi enjoys the legitimacy conferred by the popular vote. Curiously, those who staged the most recent coup were the very same people who had overturned the country's authoritarian government in 2005, and who had prepared the subsequent election cycle in order to hand power over to elected Mauritanian representative institutions.

However, this does not give the coup organizers any sort of a mandate to judge the president's performance. Since 2007, only Mauritanian voters have had such power. That those who staged the coup have declared their respect for constitutional institutions, and have stated their intention to hold fresh presidential elections, is pointless. The Constitution is not a menu from which the officers are allowed to pick and choose those aspects of political life that suit them, while rejecting those they don't like. They should know this, because they are the ones who drafted it.

It seems that the Mauritanians understand this as well. Reportedly, demonstrations against the putsch are still taking place in the country. If the international community remains united in rejecting the results of the coup, then there is reason to hope that what happened on August 6 will also be the last coup that Mauritania ever sees.

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