

Teim



TEIM Election Watch Analysis

BRIEFING PAPER:

**MAURITANIA / Will there be a late
"Arab Spring"?**

Javier Nievas

Date of Publication: 16 June 2011

Observatorio Electoral

Taller de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

www.election-watch.org
www.opemam.org

ISSN: being processed

www.observatorioelectoral.es

The suspension of the municipal and partial senatorial elections scheduled for April 24th may be proof that the popularity of the government is not at its height and that the protest movements that emerged after the Tunisian revolt, such as the "Youth of February 25th", are having a bigger impact than expected on the Mauritanian political scene.

Surprisingly, the sudden announcement of the suspension barely resonated in the news media - perhaps because the government gave the media instructions to avoid this subject being treated in depth. It is paradoxical that precisely now that the Arab revolts are starting to settle down in some countries, the government is giving up on one of the main arguments it put forward initially to explain the reason why the uprisings cannot spread to Mauritania, namely democratic elections. The case is however, that somehow popular debate about the reasons that led to the decision did take place, with two opposing ideas standing out. On the one hand the suspension was interpreted as a gesture towards the opposition, with whom the government wanted to resume a dialogue that the opposition claims the government has refused for months. On the other hand, the suspension has been interpreted as a sign of weakness of the government, which suspended the elections out of uncertainty and fear of not getting the results it expected. This is the most widely-accepted interpretation, and not without reason. The socio-economic climate has got increasingly worse in the last months and this has reflected on support for the government. Some of the political parties that supported or were part of the coalition for the presidential majority, like ADIL, RD, *Hatem* or *El Vadhila*, are reconsidering their support for the Union for the Republic (UPR), President Abdelaziz's party, or at least they are negotiating new conditions for their support. It looks like even inside the UPR there have been disagreements¹ and divisions², which would provide a clearer, more logical explanation of the suspension.

If at the beginning the Tunisian or Egyptian revolts did not have much impact on Mauritanian society and did not translate into major demonstrations or other forms of protest, in the medium or long term it is possible that things will be different. The prices of basic products are still rising; regularly there are claims about suspension of salary payments of workers in both private and public companies, some of which belong to strategic sectors of the country's economy. Companies such as the steel extractor SNIM, the national water company SNDE or the electric company SONELEC are involved in a lawsuit with a large percentage of their workers because of issues related to a salary increase or the improvement of working conditions. Several demonstrations have already taken place, ending without a satisfactory conclusion for both sides.

¹ Le Calame, «L'UPR sanctionne certains de ses membres», published 11/05/2011.

² Le Calame, «Discours vice président assemblée nationale : Le gouvernement sommé de trouver une solution face à l'agitation sociale», published 10/05/2011.

Recently, and for similar reasons, the National Union of Secondary Education (SNES) put its threats into motion and organized a 3 day general strike which a lot of people supported³ and that will be repeated at the end of the month. The unions in the health sector are following the same path, denouncing the authorities' unwillingness to find a solution to their demands.

And what has happened to the "Youth of February 25th" in the mean time? The members of this movement, far from getting discouraged because of the moderate participation in the first demonstrations have kept moving and step by step are getting the attention of the media. April was a key month for this change in media treatment because there were several calls for demonstrations and official communiqués by the organisation which reached their climax in the events that took place at the April 25th demonstration. There riot police carried out a harsh repression of the demonstration, dispersing the protesters violently and arresting some of their leaders. Some deputies and senators were prevented from joining the demonstration; this action caused multiple reactions from the political class and the population, angered by the violence that affected a supposedly pacific protest. Everything went back to normal with the release of the arrested youths and the call for calm from the government and the leaders of other political parties or civil society. Since then however, nothing has been the same. Since that day the February 25th movement has gained more protagonism in the media, and its demands - instead of being incidental - are slowly becoming part of Mauritanian political debate.

Maybe this is the reason why the government has decided to take action, trying to avoid the greater evil and endangering its credibility and the stability of the country. One of the main measures being studied is the possibility of creating a political association which will be able to unify different groups of young people from different parts of Mauritanian society; an association whose agenda will focus on the concerns of young people. The objective of its creation would be to counteract the growing influence and convening power of the "Youth of February 25th" and to try to reach the active element from which the movement feeds. On the other hand, some people claim that the government party is trying to lure the movement's leaders to work for its benefit⁴.

Meanwhile, the parties which belong to the Coordination of the Democratic Opposition (COD) and other opposition groups are starting to raise their voices after a period of relative silence. They have plenty of occasions to do so. One of the latest was the serious incidents at Nouakchott University where there were confrontations between two rival student unions, the Mauritanian National Student Trade Union (SNEM) and the Mauritanian National Student Union (UNEM). This event would not have been so relevant were it not for the ethnical and ideological turn it

³ Le quotidien de Nouakchott, « Grèves des enseignants du secondaire : Encore une guerre des chiffres entre le ministère et les syndicats », published 09/05/2011.

⁴ Le quotidien de Nouakchott, «Un activiste du 25 février nommé directeur à l'ANAI», published 09/05/2011.

took as a consequence of the unions' composition: the first is made up mainly of ethnic black Mauritians; the second is Arab-Berber with an Islamist tendency. The confrontation began as an SNEM demonstration denouncing several irregularities committed by the UNEM during the electoral campaign for the student representative elections in the university. But it turned into a pitched battle and the riot police had to take part. These events became politicized because of the links between the UNEM and the Islamist party TAWASSOUL. Moreover, the harshness of the police, the detention of some student leaders and the fact that opposition leaders such as Ahmed Ould Daddah could not visit them, caused great controversy. The government was highly criticized because it remained silent about the matter, and in order to calm the situation it was forced to close the university during the first days of May and release the arrested students.

In short, it can be said that Mauritania is again beginning to enter a period of political convulsions - a period that appeared to have been overcome after the presidential elections won by Abdelaziz. Fortunately, socio-economic and political problems are still not echoed on the streets as violently as in other Arab countries and participation is not high at demonstrations. The coalition of parties in government as well as the parties in opposition, coincide in using common sense and in appealing for pacific demonstrations of ideas and demands. However the economic crisis and the social problems that it causes are still present, as are other underlying problems. The result is that with those risks latent, sooner or later, any one spark could end up igniting the Mauritanian tinderbox.