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OCCASIONAL ANALYSIS:

MAURITANIA / The impact of the Tunisian Revolution and the Egyptian Crisis

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The Tunisian uprising, the fall of President Ben Ali and the current crisis in Egypt, seem to make clear that no Arab regime is immune to a revolution. However, each case must be considered differently. In the case of Mauritania, although there is an economic crisis, unemployment and social inequalities, the context is quite different from Tunisia and Egypt for several reasons:

- The current government of President Abdel Aziz has been in place for just 18 months, and was elected in presidential elections considered free and fair by international observers. These elections put an end to the massive political crisis that had existed since Abdel Aziz led a coup d'état in August 2009, against what was the first government to be elected in Mauritania since the country's democratic transition in 2007. This first democratic transition has been regarded by many as a mini-revolution, since it put an end in 2005 to the twenty-one year iron-fisted regime of Colonel Maaouya Ould Sidi Ahmed Taya.
- Abdel Aziz's government has generally allowed Mauritians and the written press in particular, extensive freedom of expression. This represents, at the very least, an escape mechanism to vent the frustrations of dissatisfied citizens and lessen their need to seek other means of expression, such as street protests. In addition, unlike Tunisia and Egypt, in Mauritania there is lively debate, a sign that the government respects freedom of expression. The result is that Mauritanian prisons today do not house any prisoners of conscience and Islamists are received regularly by the president and participate in politics like all the other political parties. This undermines one part of the logic used to justify demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt.
- The priorities of Abdel Aziz's government, announced with great fanfare, are infrastructure development, the fight against poverty, corruption, and the waste and misappropriation of public property. Regardless of the level of progress or success of these endeavours thus far, they do prevent the opposition from being able to legitimately call for street rallies.
- The army is not involved in any grievance. In Tunisia, the army's involvement has been key to the success of the revolution. In Mauritania quite the contrary is true. The military elite has ruled the country under some form of government since 1978. Since then, every president the country has had has been from the military or formerly from the military, with the exception of Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi.
- The "Arab" nature of the revolutions, upheld by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, for the moment prevents a significant portion of the multiethnic Mauritanian population from feeling fully identified and/or concerned.

That said, it is undeniable that events in Tunisia and Egypt have exerted a strong influence on Mauritania. The reaction of the population and Mauritanian civil society is gradually beginning to appear at street-level, though in a timid way for now. University students in the capital, Nouakchott, have already on occasion expressed, in a peaceful manner, their support for the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples in their struggle against their governments. For now however, there have not been any slogans against Abdel Aziz's government. The trade unions have been a little more explicit, intervening discreetly in the political debate by denouncing unemployment, the fact that many workers are not receiving their wages, rising costs of basic products, as well as social injustice. The unions recently called for a concentration, which failed to mobilise more than a few hundred people, and hardly resonated in the press.

Faced with these grievances and the global economic crisis that is seriously affecting the country, the government of Abdel Aziz has taken a series of measures such as lowering fuel prices and subsidising staple products (such as rice, flour, sugar, etc.).

On the other hand, the ruling Union for the Republic party (URP), recently appealed in a statement for political debate to be toned down.¹ It also criticised the opposition for having compared Mauritania with Tunisia and for not recognising the government's efforts. It simultaneously launched an awareness campaign, to counter the opposition's campaign about the country's "realities", calmly reminding the public of the government's achievements in terms of job creation, infrastructure development and the fight against waste and misappropriation of public property. Thus, Abdel Aziz has sought to overcome the bad management symbols of the past that the opposition has been trying to include in the current political debate.

For its part, the entire Mauritanian political class is aware that the Mauritanian context is a little different. Despite this fact, several statements have emerged however, attempting to find parallels with the situation in Tunisia and Egypt. Some of these were reactions to the death of a Mauritanian citizen who set himself alight in protest against Abdel Aziz's government. This isolated incident did not have the same effect as it did on the streets of Tunis, but did serve as a trigger for the Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD), the main opposition party, which after expressing its support for the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples' revolutions, warned, in a clear reference to the government, that "... the same causes produce the same effects..." and "security solutions are not deterrents but only serve to hasten the fall of the systems that employ them".² According to its leader, Ahmed Ould Daddah, the Mauritanian people on a daily basis face situations no less outrageous than those of the Tunisian and Egyptian peoples, which means that a reproduction of the Tunisian scenario is more than possible in Mauritania. He also made a call for liberty for the Arab peoples "from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf."

The Islamist party Tawassoul has adopted a different approach, which combines restraint with subtle radicalism. On the one hand, it has criticised the fact that the measures taken by the government to limit price increases are insufficient, warning that if not addressed this could lead to unrest. At the same time, during a recent rally the party seemed to endorse an uprising in a veiled and almost unnoticeable reference to a companion of the prophet Mohammed (Abu Dhar al-Ghifari). The speaker literally said: "*he who does not have his daily bread, and does not raise his sword against others, surprises me.*" The party has additionally requested that the government establish a clear strategy to maintain the population's purchasing power and for combating youth unemployment. It has toned down its criticism and called for national dialogue between the majority and the opposition as a way out of the current crisis.

Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, president of the National Assembly and leader of the opposition People's Progressive Alliance (APP), has spoken in the same terms. During the keynote address at a special session of Parliament, he referred to the economic crisis and advocated dialogue between the parliamentary majority and the opposition to handle the country's difficult situation.

In conclusion, it seems unlikely that a revolution of the same characteristics of Tunisia or Egypt could take place in Mauritania, either because

¹ Statement from the Executive Office of the UPR published 31 January 2011.

² Press release of the RFD leadership published on 30 January 2011.

Mauritanian society is not yet ready or mature enough, or because the necessary elements for it to happen are just not present.

However, in Mauritania there are problems that do threaten the country's stability and which require urgent action. Particularly important are those stemming from the country's multiethnic and multicultural character – elements that simply do not exist in the Tunisian or Egyptian cases. The social inequalities that are a result of the country's still existing caste system, of cohabitation between the Arab-Berber and black African ethnic groups, the end of tribalism and of patron-client relationships, and the application of the law without exceptions, are all key underlying elements. The cost of living could be a trigger for any of these latent problems, and cause a social explosion that would do away with all the government's efforts.

Finally, on top of all this, it is important to add the recent resumption of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's activity in Mauritania, which is an external factor that is potentially very destabilising, both for the government and the country as a whole. This could indeed have a distorting effect on the entire political sphere.