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Presidential Elections 2024 – Mauritania as a Pillar of Hope in the Sahel region

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Presidential elections are due to be held in Mauritania on June 29, 2024. Despite general expectations that the incumbent President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani will be re-elected, political tension remains, including for partners in Europe. This is because Mauritania has gained in importance for the EU in recent years in the Sahel region, which is experiencing coups. The European Union has concluded security and migration cooperation agreements with the only democratically elected government in the Sahel region. The desert state therefore plays an important role as a connecting country between the countries of the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa.

Mauritania's political and regional environment has changed significantly since the election of President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani in 2019. Ghazouani followed in the legacy of his predecessor Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who had ruled the country since 2008 following a coup. The election of Mohamed Ould Ghazouani in 2019 was the first democratic change in the presidency in the country's history. Accordingly, a problem-free election is not a matter of course for the country, which has been independent since 1960 and whose immediate neighbourhood has been marked by numerous changes in recent years. The country is also one of the world's poorest due to the widespread poverty.

An unstable political history

Mauritania is a Muslim state and is characterized by a deeply rooted religious character, with Islam playing a central role in the state structure as well as in social life. Around 99 percent of the population follows Sunni Islam. Sharia law, the Islamic legal system, forms the basis of the legal system and influences all areas of social life.

After the end of the French colonial era, the newly founded "Islamic Republic of Mauritania" underwent a turbulent political history. After the turmoil surrounding the former colony of Spanish Sahara, to which Mauritania

laid claim until 1979, several coups d'état took place within just a few years. The military coup led by Colonel Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya in 1984, which initiated a phase of liberalization, was decisive. In addition to the introduction of a new constitution, several elections for president and parliament were organized for the first time, although these were often criticized by the opposition as manipulated and falsified. Another coup ended Taya's many years in power, who was deposed by a group of officers in 2005 and fled into exile. The new military government promised to introduce democratic conditions within the next few years, leading to a constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections. However, another military coup led by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz took place in 2008. He was officially confirmed in office in the elections held in 2009 and 2014. Aziz's presidency was characterized by the attempt to bring more stability and security to Mauritania, even though critics accused him of authoritarian rule and suppression of the media. In the 2019 elections, President Aziz adhered to his term limits and did not stand for re-election. Instead, his political protégé Mohamed Ould Ghazouani succeeded him with 52 percent of the vote in the first round. He continued his predecessor's policy of stability and security. Ghazouani himself was born

on December 4, 1956, and entered the Mauritanian military academy at an early age. He made a career in the armed forces and was, among other positions, Chief of Staff of the Mauritanian army, and Minister of Defence. Under the presidency of Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz in particular, he was one of the key players in the military hierarchy.

Mauritania as a partner of the EU

With the series of military coups in Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso and most recently in Niger, the European Union is facing several challenges: There are hardly any partners left in the Sahel region with whom it can cooperate on security issues. Niger, in particular, was seen as a key partner for the European Union's Sahel strategy.

For the Mauritanian state, the situation in Mali is especially alarming, with its thousands of kilometres of border with Mauritania raising considerable security concerns about militant groups. In recent years, this border has increasingly become the scene of terrorist activities, smuggling and cross-border conflicts, which not only threatens the security of the region, but also spills over into Europe. The presence of terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State Group for the Greater Sahara (ISGS), has significantly exacerbated the security situation. This makes a good relationship between the European Union and Mauritania even more important, as there are also fears in Europe that terrorist activities could spill over into Mauritania or the countries of the Maghreb. This could have additional implications for the already strong migration movement towards the Mediterranean.

The fact that President Ghazouani is taking strict action against internal extremism and has introduced a strict border regulation is therefore appreciated by European partners. Mauritania is increasingly being looked at, especially after the end of the military and police missions in Mali and Niger. A new migration agreement between the EU and Mauritania, which was agreed in 2024, aims

to promote legal migration and combat migrant smuggling. Mauritania is set to play a key role in the region, which shows how closely Mauritania's domestic political developments are linked to global geopolitical interests.

According to official Spanish figures, more than 12,000 people have been registered on the Canary Islands since the beginning of 2024. Most of them arrived on the islands' shores in small and barely seaworthy boats. This is already more than in the entire first half of 2023, when a sharp increase in arrivals was also recorded.

A balancing act in economics

In addition to the migration issue, Mauritania is also attempting to balance its economic policy in the region. It can be observed that the Mauritanian government is careful not to join any regional or international alliances. This is intended to keep the doors open in a number of different perspectives. One recent example was Algeria's attempt in spring 2024 to revitalize the Maghreb Union with the involvement of Tunisia and Libya but excluding Morocco. Mauritanian President Ghazouani stayed away from the meeting, possibly also to avoid jeopardizing relations with Morocco, which is increasingly articulating economic and security policy interests in the Sahel region. On the other hand, these concerns did not prevent Mauritania from signing a new economic free trade agreement with Algeria shortly before the Maghreb meeting. Mauritania must therefore carefully consider how and to what extent it should cooperate with other countries in the region so as not to upset other potential partners.

In parallel to the Maghreb, Mauritania also has economic interests with its other neighbouring countries. For example, the country is part of the planned Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline, one of the most ambitious energy infrastructure initiatives in Africa. Mauritania is also set to benefit from the project by having the pipeline cross its territory. This will not only improve the energy supply in West

Africa, but also aims to connect the pipeline to the Maghreb-Europe pipeline, which links Morocco with Spain. The project symbolically illustrates the strategic advantages that Mauritania offers as a connecting hub between the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa.

For Germany and Europe, the country also seems to be attracting attention in terms of renewable energies. The EU has already elevated the desert state with its countless hours of sunshine to the status of a key partner for the EU Global Gateway Initiative to exploit the development potential to produce green hydrogen. This puts the EU in competition with other major British-Australian projects in Mauritania, which want to promote green hydrogen in the region. In terms of economic policy, President Ghazouani is pursuing a vision of promoting economic diversification to reduce the country's dependence on traditional raw material exports such as iron ore.

Ghazouani's term as president since the last election

Ghazouani won the last presidential election in 2019 with 52 percent of the vote in the first round. Since then, several reforms have been implemented with the support of opposition parties. For example, a proportional representation system was partially introduced in 2022, which was used for the first time in the 2023 parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, the political parties with the most votes continue to benefit disproportionately in the distribution of seats in parliament: for example, the ruling party "El Insaf" won 107 of 176 seats in parliament with around 35 percent of the vote. In addition, the Independent National Electoral Commission was reformed in 2022 and is now considered more impartial, which has strengthened the credibility and integrity of the electoral system. Another positive development was the agreement of a Charter of National Understanding in 2023 between the ruling party "El Insaf" and leading opposition parties. This charter sets out principles of national unity and now forms a basis for political consensus and cooperation.

However, Ghazouani's presidency has not been free of controversy and challenges. Criticism of the ruling party sometimes leads to arrests of members of the opposition or media professionals. Despite all the reforms, freedom of expression and freedom of the press are still restricted. Corruption is also a structural problem in Mauritania. President Ghazouani has made the fight against corruption a political priority. However, there are concerns that Ghazouani's anti-corruption measures are primarily being used against political opponents, including his former mentor and predecessor in the presidency, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. The former was sentenced to five years in prison for corruption in 2023, which led to political tensions in the country. Aziz aspired to run in the 2024 presidential elections, but was not allowed to stand, citing his prison sentence.

Opposing candidates and outlook for the 2024 elections

One of the most important of the six opposing candidates is Biram Dah Abeid, a prominent activist in the fight against modern slavery. Despite the obstacles and prison sentences he has suffered in recent years for his commitment, he was able to win 19 percent of the vote in the last election. His commitment to the abolition of slavery, which was only officially abolished in Mauritania in 1981, has made him a significant figure in the political landscape. Abeid himself comes from a "Haratin" family, which was historically affected by slavery and was often discriminated against. Traditionally, there are population groups that continue to suffer the consequences of this practice despite the official abolition of slavery. This particularly affects the "Afro-Mauritians", who have served as slaves to the "Bidhan", an Arab-Berber group, for generations. The "Bidhan" make up between 20 and 30 percent of the population. A significant 40 percent of the population are the "Haratin", former slaves who are now free and see themselves as a separate caste. Up to 20 percent of the population are still informally considered slaves. Despite their significant share of the

population, the "Afro-Mauritanians" are systematically excluded from positions of power.

Another challenging voice is Hamadi Ould Sid' El Moctar, the leader of the Islamist opposition party "Tewassoul". He and his party advocate an even more Islamic government and society. Accordingly, they have a broad following among parts of the conservative and religious population.

Despite their high profile, the opposing candidates do not pose a serious threat to Ghazouani's probable re-election. His party has a clear lead over the second strongest party "Tewassoul", especially since the last parliamentary elections in 2023. The upcoming election could therefore be seen as a confirmation of his way of governing and provide an up-to-date picture of the population's opinion on Ghazouani's popularity. It will therefore be important for the presidential supporters to decide the elections with an absolute majority in the first round on June 29, as in 2019, and not have to go to a run-off election on July 14. In 2019, the opposition described Ghazouani's election as a "new military coup". The acceptance of the result, in whatever form, will show to what extent the reforms agreed between the ruling party and the opposition in recent years are viable and thus contribute to the stabilization of the country. This is particularly important in the context of Mauritania's importance as a reliable partner for the EU in an unstable Sahel region.



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