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## **PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA: A CASE STUDY MAURITANIA**

The name of Africa has long been associated with natural disasters, endemic diseases, famine, political upheavals, civil wars, ethnic cleansing, dearth of individual and group liberties and the quasi impossibility to have a real democracy. This is partly due to the nature of the traumatic history of the continent, but mainly because of the absence of discipline, and the slowness of the emergence of strong independent civil society and a strong independent judiciary system. Furthermore, the initial sin of African independence -which is the fact that most of the time the colonizers handed over power to a group of people according to their own choice regardless of the aspirations of the people- contributed a lot to the development of a culture of violence and tyranny. These new leaders immediately assumed they are rather accountable to the former colonizer than to their own people, because their power was initially derived from the former colonizer. This situation led to the establishment of one-party state system almost systematically across the continent. Thus, the military institution found itself somehow the only remaining alternative to the existing system, and therefore concerned by bringing in a change of some kind. Yet, the problem with the military regimes is that as soon as a coup is acclaimed successful, another counter coup starts brewing underneath. In fact this is the major hypothesis I attempted to develop in my Dissertation. "Every military revulsion harbors in its womb the seeds of a counter revolution, therefore in most of the cases military tyrannies are hardly changed by means other than military coups"

During the last decade the continent has witnessed many human tragedies that can be ascribed to a multitude of socio-economic factors on the one hand, but mainly to

politico politician strategies used by African politicians either to cling to power or to get to it using undemocratic means. Examples of such broken, corrupt systems coupled with vicious maneuvers one can mention DRC, Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, Ethiopia, Central Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leon, to mention but a few. These different countries show the widespread of broken political systems almost all over the continent. However, it is not always dark and gloomy everywhere on the continent, the exemplary peaceful transition of power between two different political parties in Senegal in 2000 and the successful military hand over of power to civilians first in Mali 1991-1992 and more recently in Mauritania 2007 is a prove that Africans can have a democracy that works. Now, the one thousand dollar question is how to develop a sustainable culture of peaceful transition by means of ballots instead of bullets. What we need to seek is not only to draft idealistic constitutions and reliable democratic systems, but also enforce these mechanisms regardless of Race, ethnicity, religion, gender and social class.

This paper will investigate the different facets of the practices of democracy, in Africa in general and Mauritania in particular, with a special focus on ways in which the process can be improved, consolidated so that the game becomes part and parcel of the daily practices of every single individual. How can we avoid tragic setbacks of fairly and justly established democracy the way it happened in Mauritania March 11, 2007?

Mauritania gained its independence from France November 28, 1960 during the high **waves** of independence, end of 1950s and early 1960s. This independence has nothing particular, the colonizer organized a YES or NO referendum across French West Africa to decide whether they want to remain part of the French community or wants to be independent. Mauritians called for independence and they were granted what they asked for. One dominating party, led by the first Mauritanian to graduate from a French University, was given the reign of power in Mauritania, because he was successful in gaining the confidence of the French colonizers. It all started with elections and ended by a president appointed because his party dominated the National Assembly. Thus, NO Universal vote was ever offered to Mauritanians in order to choose

their president. The question here is: how such National Assembly was elected? How reliable was the process? I personally question the fairness of such a process, simply because the conditions can not be qualified as conducive to any kind of democratic activities. The then French colony was comprised of a bunch of feudal tribes whose economy depended heavily on trade and slaves? So, I would say the French gave power to President Mokhtar Ould Dadah with the hope that his tribe will need to make some alliances with larger tribes and sort out a way to rule this newly born country. The point here is not necessarily to question the credibility of the father of our independence; it is rather to make it clear where the rain started to beat us, as Achebe said.

Even though the start was not the most democratic possible, there was still hope to make some progress in the right direction. That hope started to peter away with the outlined ambitions of Mr. President to group major political parties and nationalist movements in one unique party. He claimed that Mauritania was not ready for the kind of democracy that existed in the West. His claim was that Mauritania has fragile social bonds and can not afford exacerbating social frictions due to tribalism, ethnicity, regionalism and conflicting national Identity. That is, there were two major movements each of which was trying to place Mauritanian on the orbit it identifies with the most. The Arab National Movements wanted Mauritania to be moving in the Arab orbit because it is an Arab Country first and foremost (according to them), whereas the black Afro-Mauritanians considered Mauritania to be an African country first and foremost, therefore must be moving in the African orbit. Looking at these two groups' orientation one can see clearly the seeds of a social conflict.

The new President Mokhtar Ould Dadah, decided to reconcile the different tendencies and put them to work together under the umbrella of one unique party (Mauritanian People's Party). Mr. President formalized the one-party system through a new constitution in 1961, which allowed him to be reelected in 1966, 1971 and 1976. This is where the tradition of one authoritarian presidential regime started in Mauritania, yet the same process is true almost all over the continent.

The result of the establishment of such system is a growing social dismay as the individual liberties shrank gradually and the outcome of elections became more and more a pre-established reality. Elections were turned into a sheer formality that the leaders organize every five years to show to the world that there is certain level of popular participation in the management of the state. Yet the world knew it was just an orchestrated comedy with an already known denouement. It is important to note here that the regime was not military, but the way it behaved offered no other option for power alternation except the one proposed by the military forces. The irony here is that Mauritanian civilians were the ones to blame of the initial sin of creating the right conditions for the military institution to step into politics. It is the failure of the civilian regime that led to the first military coup led by Lt Colonel Moustapha Ould Mouhamed Saleck in July 10, 1978 as an opening of an endless saga of six successful Military coups and a couple of unsuccessful ones in the last thirty years.

The longest period a dictator spent in office was about twenty years. That was Colonel Mouaiya Ould Sid Ahmed Taya, who came to power 12/12/ 1984 when he toppled Mohamed Khouna Ould Heidala in a bloodless military coup. Later on the same military officer started a sham democracy in the country in the early 1990s under an intense pressure from the international community. Even though, the international community knew the kind of democracy Taya was offering to his people, they still cooperated with his regime, hoping that one day things will change.

True, things will change one day; they in fact changed the way they could and the way they should be expected to change. A military coup took over the regime of Taya, not to protect the country but rather to protect the system itself. After a very violent attempted coup in 2003, the military hierarchy decided to bring a change from within and consolidate its grip over power. This is what many observers advanced as a legitimate reason for the henchmen of Taya to turn against him while he was traveling to Saoudia Arabia to present his condolences to the bereaved family of King Fahd.

The new ruling junta pledged to hand over power to civilians in the shortest period possible. They started a series of reforms in preparation for what is to be declared the cleanest, the fairest, and the most transparent election process the country has ever seen. International Observers from all around the world were allowed access to ballots across the country. These observers declared the elections were fair and clean.

All of a sudden what was the cradle of dictatorship entered the realm of democratic countries on the red carpet and with a deafening applause from the world political leaders and NGOs. Mauritania was cited as an example of a successful democratic transition of power, not only in Africa, but also in the Arab Muslim world. The expectations were too high that Mauritania can be taken for a role model to probe the Arab world and prove that being a Muslim and Arab does go perfectly with the principles of democracy.

As soon as the newly elected president took oath, the pace of progress slowed down, the expectations started to erode and above all the confidence of the population was seriously questioned. It is true that the international financial context was not very friendly, yet the masses were struggling harder and harder to make ends meet. While the common people were trying to figure out why their first president democratically elected is taking unnecessarily long time to tackle serious issue he promised to fix during his campaign trail, another serious drama was being staged behind the scenes. Mauritians were surprised by the inefficiency of the government and a little by little they started to see more and more of the former regime symbols coming back to office. Such alliances were against nature, yesterday's deadly enemies working hand in hand to make the nation works; most Mauritians doubted the real rational behind such strategies. This alliance gives a taste of the changing alliances between the Eurasia, Eastasia and Oceania in George Orwell's *1984*.

Meanwhile, the real drama was going on between the military hierarchy and the Presidential Palace. The Hierarchy does not want to stay out of politics. In fact the

military hierarchy was just following its real agenda, which is to put a temporary civilian president for a couple of years and then make a come back in a democratic way. The chief of the presidential guard, lately promoted to the rank of General, was pulling the strings of what is considered Senators (Puppet Senators) to challenge the president and his wife on corruption allegations. This was a way to push the president out of office in a legal way, which is to resign.

This led to a cabinet reshuffle to satisfy the claims of the rebellious senators. But it did not work because the ultimate goal was to get the resignation of the president and call for early elections that will pave the way for a military come back in civilian cloaks. That strategy did not work and the tension was exacerbated by an additional unnecessary quarrel between the president's wife and General Aziz that quickened the downfall of President Sidi, according to reports of local national press. Here one has to acknowledge that The President either did not have good advisors or did not listen to them, when he decided to dismiss the four Military chiefs with one presidential decree. The retaliation was very quick as if planned for long time. The military hierarchy deposed the president in less than one hour of him issuing their dismissal.

This provides us with a good lesson, which is you can not all of a sudden become a democratic country. Democracy is not a package we can buy from the supermarket. It is a culture, it is a system, it is a civic value, it is an institution. Unless the principles of democracy are sound there can not be any viable democracy. What can be done is to start with putting in place a trustworthy system that protects individual rights, promotes citizens' responsibility and ensures government accountability in front of the law and in front of constituencies.

What needs to be done urgently to help develop and preserve democracy in Africa is to enforce the already existing laws and regulations. The NGOs need more support and more training to be more efficient in playing their role of civil society builders. The politicians must have professional development sessions to update them about better practices of power. Meanwhile, a great emphasis must be set on

developing a sense of belonging among the masses. All citizens must feel they belong to a nation and that they have responsibilities in developing, building and protecting this nation. They have the obligation to preserve it as the property of all and each one.