

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Delegation for relations with the Maghreb countries and the Arab Maghreb Union (including Libya)

Visit to Mauritania by a delegation working group
3 to 5 May 2006

Report by Luisa Fernanda Rudi Ubeda, Chairwoman of the delegation

Introduction

On 9 February 2006 the Conference of Presidents authorised the Delegation for relations with the Maghreb countries and the Arab Maghreb Union to send a six-member delegation to Mauritania to assess the political situation after the events of 3 August 2006 and the prospects for holding elections.

The political groups appointed the following members to the working party: Luisa Fernanda Rudi Ubeda (PPE-DE, Spain, Chairwoman), Alain Hutchinson (PSE, Belgium, Vice-Chairman), Francesco Musotto (PPE-DE, Italy), John Attard-Montalto (PSE, Malta), Lydie Polfer (ALDE, Luxembourg) and Ģirts Valdis Kristovskis (UEN, Latvia).

The working party visited Mauritania between 3 and 5 May and met the Head of State, the Prime Minister and the principal transition government ministers, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and representatives of the parties and civil society. It also visited development projects. The working party was also able to hold in-depth discussions with the ambassadors of the Member States and the Head of the Commission Delegation in Mauritania.

The working party is especially grateful to the Head of the Commission Delegation, who with his team made a substantial contribution to the success of the visit.

In drafting this report, we have preferred an analytical rather than a chronological presentation.

I. Political situation

On 3 August 2005, taking advantage of the fact that the head of state, Ould Taya, was out of the country, a group of soldiers led by the Director-General of National Security, Colonel Ely Ould Mohammed Vall, seized power in Nouakchott.

The international community condemned this forcible seizure of power.

Nevertheless it speedily appeared that this coup d'état was not typical: not only were there no deaths or injuries but the Military Council for Justice and Democracy (MCJD) speedily set up a transition government, promised elections and ended press censorship. Colonel Vall, Head of State during the transition period, has given an undertaking that neither he nor any members of the MCJD or the transition government will stand for election.

On 14 September 2005 a Mauritanian delegation consisting of former MPs and the Ambassador in Brussels addressed the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly's Committee on Political Affairs to give reassurances about the events of 3 August. Chbih Ould Cheikh Melaïnine (Popular Front), a former opponent, also attended the meeting and stressed that the events of 3 August had specific implications.

The European Union, which entered into consultations under Article 96 of the ACP-EU Partnership Agreement (Cotonou Agreement), has suspended aid for two major road and port infrastructure projects. Given the specific nature of the situation in Mauritania, the other projects have been maintained, particularly in relation to institutional support. Since the opening of consultations, Mauritania has entered into 24 undertakings relating to respect for democratic principles, respect for fundamental rights and freedoms and respect for the rule of law and good governance, and has promised to report regularly on their implementation.

One of the most important commitments concerns preparation for elections.

II. Preparation for elections

Timetable

Undertaking no 1 states that the transition authorities undertake to hold elections for the transition period as soon as possible and in any case before the end of March 2007. The transition authorities undertake to install the new elected bodies by the end of May 2007 at the latest.

The election timetable has subsequently been set as follows:

- referendum: 25 June 2006
- legislative and municipal elections: 19 November 2006
- presidential elections: 11 March (first round) and 25 March 2007 (second round).

The decision to hold the presidential elections last is intended to create the conditions for election of a pluralist parliament.

INEC

INEC consists of 15 people from various backgrounds who, it is reported, have been chosen for their experience and integrity. It has the task of organising the census on voting entitlement (Recensement à vocation électorale – RAVEL) and of holding elections.

Census on voting entitlement (RAVEL)

The census was organised by INEC officials in two stages: first door-to-door then with a month in fixed offices. It finished its work on 30 April. The Chairman of INEC said it was satisfactory in that it had resulted in an electoral roll registering 1.01 million people.

However, this number appears low compared with various estimates of a total population of about 2.8 million inhabitants. Several hypotheses have been put forward to explain this significant difference: failure to take account of Mauritians abroad (see below), the number of people aged under 18 and the lack of reliable previous estimates. According to several observers, the 1995 census was not completely trustworthy. These hypotheses probably partly explain the difference. However, gaps in the census cannot be ruled out. Several political party representatives have complained to the working party of the difficulties that some people have experienced in proving their identity. They felt that the requirement to produce their parents' and grandparents' birth certificates discriminated against people who were displaced in crisis conditions – in particular those who were expelled after the events of 1989 – or returning refugees, particularly those from the Senegal River region. Moreover some census officials have been more strict or less strict about document requirements depending on whether they were dealing with people of Arab-Berber origins or black African origins.

It is essential that the transition authorities tackle these problems so they can correct omissions that may undermine the election process as a whole. The next revision of the electoral roll will be carried out in January (annual review date). The working party suggested on several occasions that the period immediately after the referendum (July and August 2006) should be used for a first review.

The problem of Mauritanians abroad

Colonel Vall has said that Mauritania is a country of emigration. The number of Mauritanians abroad has been estimated at several hundred thousand people, with an upper figure of 500 000. It comprises refugees in Senegal and Mali, migrant workers and a diaspora in other countries in Africa, the Gulf, Europe and North America.

The transition authorities very quickly opted to exclude Mauritanians abroad from the 2006 and 2007 elections, unless they return to register and vote. The three reasons given are:

- the low number of Mauritanian diplomatic representations abroad,
- the cost,
- the risk of prolonging the transition period and keeping the military in power.

The working party believes that more serious consideration should be given to the possibility of polling stations in refugee camps in Mali and Senegal, which contain large Mauritanian groups, as that has been successfully tried in other countries. Moreover, even if Mauritanians abroad can be excluded from the elections intended to end the transition, this should be remedied in future.

Balloting methods

According to Cheikh Sid' Ahmed Ould Babamine, Chairman of INEC, the balloting method is a synthesis of the political parties' demands. The transition authorities have chosen a mixed balloting method for the parliamentary elections: of the 93 seats, a third will be reserved for proportional representation on the basis of three lists in the agglomerations and a national list, the rest will be filled by two-round majority voting.

The municipal elections will be subject to fully proportional voting, with a 5% threshold.

Some political party representatives have commented that the voting method could be unfair in that the constituencies have different population levels, with differences ranging from one to 10. Moreover, there is a risk that majority voting in rural areas will confirm the position of people high up in the old regime and produce a conservative parliament incapable of adopting the reforms needed for Mauritania's development.

Political parties and the election campaign

The delegation met the political parties, which number 36.

In general the political parties support the transition process and recognise that the events of 3 August have set in train a profound change towards democracy.

But political groupings and former opponents have also been caught out by the changes. The large number of parties reveals a lack of political cohesion, without any increase in different programmes or ideologies. It is likely that the first elections will encourage regroupings and coalitions.

The groupings inherited from ex-President Taya's party or the opposition that was tolerated by the former regime are ahead in terms of personnel and financial resources. The new groupings that have emerged from the clandestine opposition or have been created recently are generally less well equipped to fight a national election campaign.

The transition government has promised public financing if the 36 parties that have entered the ring can agree on a financing method, which is not yet the case. The parties that will be most penalised by the lack of an agreement are obviously the smallest ones. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which is supporting the election process, is planning to work with the parties by providing them with information kits (posters and election material) rather than giving direct financial aid.

Women's participation

The electoral code includes a requirement that at least 20% of the candidates in each party must be women. Although this undeniably represents progress compared with the past, several women to whom the working party spoke thought that this was insufficient and, above all, feared that the parties would put women in the non-electable positions on the lists (proportional voting) or in constituencies where there was no hope of winning (majority voting). The transition government is considering incentives in addition to the quota rule.

The European Union's role in the electoral process

The European union is contributing EUR 6 million, or about one third of the total cost, to the financing of the elections, under the European Development Fund (EDF). There are also plans to respond to the Mauritanian Government's invitation to send a European Union election observation mission, with election experts starting work as soon as the referendum takes place and a larger team, led by an MEP, for the parliamentary and presidential elections.

The European Parliament's coordination group for elections has put Mauritania on its priority list for 2006.

III. Economic and social situation

Great poverty and social inequality

'We are a rich country with poor people' is the verdict of Habib Ould Hemmet, Secretary-General to the Presidency.

According to one person we spoke to, a study carried out in 1995 revealed that 37 people in Mauritania held 62% of the wealth. Although the working party could not really check this figure, an enormous proportion of the population certainly lives in the greatest poverty without access to drinking water or basic health and education services. The illiteracy rate is over 45%. At the same time the old regime, under which corruption was general, fostered the fortunes of certain individuals. Public service was seen as a means to personal enrichment and the distinction between public and private wealth was questionable.

Although the transition government cannot be asked to solve all the problems inherited from the past, it is essential that it takes strong action to stop economic crime going unpunished.

Finally the advent of oil revenues, about EUR 400 million over eight years for off-shore deposits exploited by Woodside (see below), provides an opportunity to meet the basic needs of the population and reduce the flagrant social inequalities in Mauritania.

Good governance

According to Colonel Vall, 'possibilities have been lost by poor management of the country'. The transition authorities have ratified international conventions on combating corruption and have committed themselves to drawing up an anti-corruption plan and reforming public contracts. Good governance is one of the three axes of the transition programme.

Oil exploitation

Oil exploitation by Woodside began in April 2006. After the transition government came to power, there was a dispute over a certain points in the contract, particularly amendments to the contract, but finally an agreement was reached, the minister formerly responsible was released from prison, and operations could begin on time.

The contract between the Australian Woodside company and the Mauritanian state, for about one billion euros of oil revenues, states that about 60% goes to the former and 40% to the latter.

Exploration for new oil fields is currently in progress .

Oil should enable Mauritania to move in a relatively short period from being a less advanced country to being a medium-wage country.

The transition authorities have promised to apply the principles of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative.

Fish stocks

With 700 km of coastline, one of Mauritania's main resources is fish. The European Union and Mauritania are bound by a fisheries agreement that expires on 31 July 2006.

At the time of the working party's visit, the two parties had not yet reached agreement on renewal of the agreement and the matter was raised with several interviewees, including the President and the Prime Minister.

The Mauritanian party considers the proposed price of EUR 102.24 million for 635 000 tonnes is not satisfactory and moreover thinks the first tranche should be paid in 2006.

On prices, the Mauritanian party has pointed to the agreement with Morocco, which makes provision for higher compensation. But the agreements do not cover the same products and the Moroccan fish distribution network is more lucrative (sales of fresh fish in Spain whereas most Mauritanian fish is tinned).

Despite the present impasse, most interviewees agreed that it was essential to reach agreement as the European Union is Mauritania's first strategic partner (Prime Minister).

The alternatives to a fisheries agreement with the EU (with the Asian countries for example) would probably be less profitable for Mauritania. Private contracts are also an option but they are less transparent and are more liable to fraud and abuses.

Cooperation with the European Union

The national indicative programme for the ninth European Development Fund (EDF) in April 2002 makes provision for:

- an A-envelope for long-term development (EUR 115 million, 82% of which goes to the transport sector and 12 % for strengthening capacity (consolidation of democracy and the rule of law),
- a B-envelope (EUR 77 million, of which EUR 45 million goes to SYSMIN and EUR 32 million to combating the effects of possible external factors.

Cooperation, which was partially suspended after the events of the 3 August, is now due to be fully resumed with the imminent closure of the consultations under Article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement.

IV. Environmental protection

The working party visited the Banc d'Arguin national park. The park is an excellent example of how to balance traditional fishing and conservation. Only traditional fishing on foot and by non-motorised boats is authorised.

Limited and controlled tourism, sometimes in the form of village cooperatives, has led to job and income creation.

The draft fisheries agreement makes provision for a million euros a year for the park.

Conclusions

The working party was pleased to note that the events of 3 August have opened a new era in Mauritania. The main actors in the transition process have so far proved their sincerity and have kept their undertakings. In particular, the holding of free and fair elections, the first in the Mauritania's history, would be an essential stage in the establishment of democracy and would serve as a model for the region. The working party has also noted that in general there is national consensus concerning the transition. Among the political groups and civil society, freedom of speech augurs well for a living and dynamic democracy.

The election census has generally worked satisfactorily although improvements could be made. It would be desirable to use the period between the end of the constitutional referendum and the parliamentary and municipal elections to complete the election lists and in particular to ensure improved opportunities for black African populations and the inhabitants of remote areas.

At the same time, certain major problems inherited from the past remain. This is the case with unpunished economic crime and humanitarian problems. Although the transition authorities cannot solve all the problems in a few months, it is essential that they take strong action in these areas too.

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Working party visit to Mauritania, 3-5 May 2006

DRAFT PROGRAMME

Wednesday 3 May 2006

- 14.10 Arrival
- 16.30 Meeting with Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall
Chairman of the Military Council for Justice and Democracy, Head of State
- 17.30 Meeting with H.E. Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar
Prime Minister
- 19.00 Meeting with the EU and ACP ambassadors at the Delegation
H.E. Patrick Nicoloso, Ambassador of France
H.E. Ernst Joachim Döring, Ambassador of Germany
H.E. Alejandro Polanca Mata, Ambassador of Spain
- 20.00 Reception at the residence of Jean-Eric Paquet, Head of Delegation

Thursday 4 May 2006

- 8.00 Leave the hotel
- 8.30-10.30 Meetings with political parties at the Delegation
- 10.30-12.30 Meetings with representatives of civil society
- Meetings with civil society
- 10.30-11.00**
AMDH (Mauritanian Human Rights Association)
GERDDES (Study and Research Group on Democracy and Economic and Social
Development)
SOS Slaves
FONADH (National Forum of Mauritanian NGOs for Human and Peoples'
Rights)
Committee for Solidarity with Victims of Repression in Mauritania
- 11.00-11.30**
Civic Initiative

Mauritanian Human Rights League
NGOs' Collective for Defence of the Rule of Law
National Order of Lawyers

11.30-12.00

Employers' Union
Mohamed Ould Bouamatou
Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Sadegh

12.00-12.30

Citizens' Alternative
FNDPFE (National Forum for Promotion of Women's and Children's Rights)
NICT and Citizenship

Place: Commission Delegation

12.30-13.30 Meeting with Cheikh Sid' Ahmed Ould Babamine, Chairman of the Independent National Election Committee, and the members of the INEC
Place: Office of the Chairman of the INEC

13.30 Lunch with the members of INEC

15.00-17.00 Meeting with the interministerial committee responsible for the democratic transition
H.E. Habib Ould Hemmet (Secretary-General to the Presidency)
H.E. Ahmed Ould Sid' Ahmed, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation
H.E. Mahfoudh Ould Bettah, Minister of Justice
H.E. Mohamed Ahmed Ould Mohamed Lemine, Minister of the Interior
H.E. Mohamed Ould El Abed, Minister of Economic Affairs

17.30 Meeting with the press

20.00 Official dinner hosted by the authorities

Friday 5 May 2006

8.30 Leave for the Banc d'Arguin national park
Visit to development projects
Lunch

16.00 Return to Nouakchott

22.55 Departure