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# The flexible use of democracy in an Islamic Republic: The case of the Mauritanian President Abdel Aziz (2009–2019)

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The protesters associated with the social movement that some call ‘the second Arab Spring’ (Ayoob 2019) gathered around the slogan ‘All, meaning all!’ (*Kullkun ya ‘nī kullkun*), calling for the removal of all politicians, without exception, from governing positions. This chapter investigates whether the contempt for political elites felt by large segments of various populations scattered throughout the southern Mediterranean served as an inspiration for Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (hereafter Aziz), who, after coming to power in 2007 (officially elected in 2009), decided to launch a direct attack on the country’s former ruling class.

Aziz’s answer to prominent Mauritanian politician Ould Khatri – a political leader from the eastern regions of the country who promptly offered his services in the aftermath of Aziz’s coup d’état – may be revealing in this respect: ‘I do not need you [i.e. authority figures and politicians] to run the country anymore.’ This statement put an end to the Mauritanian ‘tradition’ of governance by an unchanging political elite with a grip on the reins of power, in some cases since the country’s independence in 1960. This radical attitude, hardly expected of a putschist seeking support,<sup>1</sup> may in truth have been a Machiavellian exploitation of the unpopularity of politicians, who were often seen as opportunistic and willing to acquiesce to any ruling power in order to maintain the privileges provided by this patronage system. Aziz surfed the populist wave that allowed him to dominate the political scene by virtually eliminating a de facto unpopular ruling class while assuming what can only be described, as we will see, as authoritarian rule over Mauritania ‘dressed up’ as a democracy.

What explains the ascension to power of this ex-general, who has marked Mauritania’s political landscape for the past fifteen years?<sup>2</sup> Can it be associated with ‘strongman’ forms of neopatrimonialism (see Bratton and Van de Walle 1994: 474–5, who classify Mauritania as a ‘military oligarchy’) or with the hybridization of power, as defined by Dufy and Thiriot (2013; see also Driscoll 2020)? Perhaps it is comparable to the pretorianism described by Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh and the

so-called 'Sultanian' form of governance, supposedly explained by the notion that Mauritians are intrinsically predisposed to 'despotic rulers' (Ould Cheikh 2003, 2006)? Far from this line of questioning, most of the authors who have addressed the Mauritanian context in recent years have focused on the political reality and on statements evoking economic and diplomatic questions on both a local and a global scale – recurrent coups, institutional crises, the populist nature of President Aziz's campaign, the destabilization of the region and its consequences for militant activities and drug trafficking. The dynamics of political promotion and social mobility were noted more than twenty years ago by Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem (1998), who referred in particular to the 'ascension routes' of the *ḥarāṭīn* elite.<sup>3</sup> Antil and Lesourd (2014) have provided an account of the different facets of Aziz's policies<sup>4</sup> and his form of government, emphasizing, in an article with the telling title 'I must control everything', the 'highly centralized and vertical character of his governance' (2014: 275).<sup>5</sup> Despite their familiarity with the subject, however, these authors mainly stress the continuity of his methods of exercising power (through the manipulation of ethnic identities, regional interests and tribal allegiances), which, according to them, were not so different from those used by his predecessors. In this chapter, I will offer arguments to the contrary by analysing President Aziz's will to remove an entire political class from power, thus characterizing his reign as a rupture with Mauritania's postcolonial political traditions. This action proved decisive to Aziz's legitimation, but the processes he engaged with require further exploration, beyond describing Aziz's actions as an attempt to create a new ruling class – or indeed, in Aziz's own words, 'a new Mauritania' – via 'tacit lustration'. In this vein, it seems relevant to reconsider his centralizing tendencies and the autocratic inflections that marked his presidency.

This study draws on empirical data, including Aziz's speeches, the administrative and legal acts of his government, and further analysis of his actions, notably towards the local political elite. The political class is here defined as 'actors who hold positions of power or political resources (ministerial posts or elected offices) and who are likely, in a Weberian sense, to earn their living off them' (Genieys 2006: 133). The chapter begins with an overview of the categories and typologies of transitional power in general, proceeding to the presentation and analysis of the Mauritanian context under President Aziz.

### Intermediate political categories

The governance exercised by President Aziz between 2009 and 2019 can be seen as a particular use of the democratic system, quite different in practice from that which he claimed to promote. Behind formally democratic structures we can easily observe autocratic practices that make it appropriate to characterize this regime as an intermediate or hybrid one, falling somewhere between the democratic and the autocratic.

Such regimes are studied by the emerging discipline of transology, which, as the name suggests, is dedicated to examining forms of political power that are no longer dictatorships but not yet democracies – many of which first arose in the shift away

from totalitarianism in Eastern Europe (Saxonberg and Linde 2003), Latin America (Brinks et al. 2014) and Africa from the beginning of the 1990s (for the West African Sahel, see Villalón 2010). Transitology presupposes in principle that the regimes in question are evolving towards democratization. This has often been far from the case, however, with significant setbacks leading to a return to totalitarian rule, in some cases even leading to civil war (Dufy and Thiriot 2013; Levitsky and Way 2002).

To designate the regimes of this grey zone, 'for which the qualification of a totalitarian regime did not apply in all rigor', some authors have introduced the concept of authoritarianism (Droz-Vincent 2004: 946). To further emphasize the hybrid nature of these powers, researchers have specifically evoked the concept of neopatrimonialism, which combines traditional heritage with modern state institutions while manifesting a tendency to conflate the public and the private sphere (Brossier 2019). This category of governance, previously applied mainly to sub-Saharan African countries, has gradually expanded to embrace most mixed-regime countries outside the West.

One of the most extreme expressions of neopatrimonialism is dictatorship in which a single individual governs the entire state apparatus, gradually reducing the power held by institutions and other elements of the political system. Their monopoly on power and the elimination of opponents generally allows such leaders to declare themselves president for life (Bratton and Van de Walle 1994). This weakening of democracy directly undermines the usual path established by transitology (one *towards* democracy) and may signal a need for the new category of 'post-transition', in which formal compliance with the standard criteria of democratic life is accompanied by a substantive movement beyond forms and labels (Dufy and Thiriot 2013). This formal respect for democratic rules runs parallel to totalitarian acts.

Although elections in such states are regularly held and generally free of widespread fraud, incumbents routinely abuse state resources, deny the opposition adequate media coverage, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate electoral results. Journalists, opposition politicians and other government critics may be spied on, threatened, harassed or arrested. Members of the opposition may be jailed, exiled or – less frequently – even assaulted or murdered. Regimes characterized by such abuses cannot be called democratic. Rather than openly violating democratic rules (for example by banning or repressing the opposition and the media), incumbents are more likely to use bribery, co-optation and more subtle forms of persecution (through tax authorities, compliant judiciaries and other state agencies) to 'legally' harass, persecute and extort cooperative behaviour from critics (Levitsky and Way 2002: 53).

This type of competitive authoritarianism falls under a category that combines 'free elections with the authoritarian use of power', the cornerstone of which 'is the unequal access of parties to financial, media and legal resources[,] inequality that largely undermines the opportunities available to the opposition to contest by the ballot the domination of the ruling elites' (Dufy and Thiriot 2013: 24). Yet another political category, that of 'defective democracy', is also relevant in this regard. In this context, we may be witnessing a gradual shift from the 'democratic transitions' model to other types of power structures, which further undermines the notion that the

regimes studied by transitology are moving toward the implementation of democratic institutions (Droz-Vincent 2004; Levitsky and Way 2002).

In this critique of transitology, the fundamental question regarding adherence to democratic norms is complicated by the extent to which the regimes in question, supposedly moving towards democratization, continue to demonstrate a decidedly authoritarian inflection. This tension is in part explained by the longevity of these regimes and their apparent 'stability' (Droz-Vincent 2004: 963).

It is important to emphasize that the inefficiency of the opposition also plays a key role in the 'normalized' political and institutional landscape that is undermined by autocrats. It is no longer the opposition that threatens the longevity of authoritarian powers but their inability to secure a monopoly on the distribution of material resources and the manipulation of the levers of legitimacy. In order to grasp the reasons for the resilience of authoritarianism, various mechanisms must be described and analysed. Given that democracy in its ideal form cannot be described as standard practice in most countries – which are usually more concerned with security than with fully realizing democratic norms – it is necessary to look at how these systems function and their strategies for intervening in different segments of society and the economy. It is equally important to question the dynamics of these political regimes since, as Genieyes (2006: 139) confirms, 'the transformation of the social structure of the elite, as an adaptation to changes in society, has always been regarded as a reliable indicator of regime change'.

In the remainder of this chapter, these approaches will be applied comparatively to the Mauritian case, with the aim of better understanding how President Aziz exploited a well-known set of processes to secure legitimacy and ensure a quasi-monopoly on authority while keeping up democratic appearances – a form of window dressing that was crucial to his relationship with Western partners.

## The (populist) fight against mismanagement

Aziz's inauguration was marked by a series of populist measures, including the allocation of plots of land, a reduction of the price of essential goods, major road works and bringing water and electricity to the poorest districts of Nouakchott (El Haycen 2016: 22). He gave himself the moniker 'president of the poor' (*ra'īs al-fuqarā*), indicating his primary commitment to the more disadvantaged among the population (Makhmutova 2020: 610; Villasante Cervello 2013: 17). His announcements and promises were usually made in the presence of large crowds and took place while visiting hospitals, construction sites and at political meetings while touring the country.

Independence Day celebrations presented another special opportunity for Aziz to announce his agenda.<sup>6</sup> His speeches centred on several key issues, some of which borrowed heavily from positions previously taken by the opposition, such as the topic of diplomatic relations with Israel, his 'anti-system' stance and his focus on social inequities (against the backdrop of the 'president of the poor' narrative). Other common themes of his public addresses included the fight against mismanagement and the valorization of anti-colonial resistance – promises that were portrayed as part

of a fearless crusade against the political elite who had preceded him and who, in his opinion, were responsible for the population's current penury. The fight against the mismanagement of public funds was often a major focus of his allocutions. Aziz, self-acknowledged as the embodiment of economic righteousness,<sup>7</sup> repeatedly stated that the eradication of all forms of financial misdealing was his government's main objective:

We are pleased with the positive results achieved since 6 August 2008, particularly in the fight against mismanagement and harmful practices that have marked our society in recent decades (...) The government continues to fight the moral crisis the eradication of which is a prerequisite for any development policy and the success of any serious enterprise (...) I take this opportunity to once again urge the corrupt and all those who capitalize on trading in influence, lies and hypocrisy, to repent and to renew our Islamic values and virtues.<sup>8</sup>

For President Aziz, mismanagement of public resources was a social scourge that had run rampant in the country for too long; fortunately, he claimed, with the events of 6 August (the day of his coup), this situation was finally about to change. He insisted that combatting this 'moral crisis' was the condition *sine qua non* for the effectiveness of his policy in this area. He called for the repentance of those involved in these nefarious practices and directly addressed the 'lost souls' (*al-qāllīn*) involved. Calling for a renewal of Islamic values and virtues, he equated the fight against corruption with a sacred struggle to end the deleterious atmosphere that had pervaded in Mauritania before his coup.

Aziz was by then also engaged in a merciless fight against the political actors of the previous regime, referring to them as 'symbols of mismanagement' (*rumūz al-fasād*). Demonizing his enemies, Aziz launched a witch hunt against the entire political class – a purge that was baptized by the official press as *Muḥārabat al-fasād wa-l-mufsidīn* ('the fight against mismanagement and the corrupt'). As a result, former Prime Minister Yahya Ould Mohamed al-Waqf was incarcerated following an obscure accusation known locally as the 'spoiled rice' affair (*mārū al-khāmīr*).<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, the authorities were imprisoning businessmen from the inner circle of ousted President Ould Taya, namely Mohamed Ould Noueïghedh, Chérif Ould Abdellahi and Abdou Maham. According to Lesourd and Antil (2014: 368–9), these powerful men had been 'vassalized' by Ould Taya and 'given disproportionate access to State resources'. It should be noted that those, now convicted of illicit enrichment, had supported Ahmed Ould Daddah, Aziz's main political opponent in the July 2009 presidential election. It is therefore possible that underneath Aziz's campaign for ethical governance was an underlying desire to settle the score with his political opponents. It also seems relevant that the dropping of the lawsuit against Ould Waghef coincided with the withdrawal of his party, the ADIL, from the coordination of the democratic opposition after it opted to ally itself with the presidential majority in support of Aziz.

The sympathy expressed by opposition leaders towards the detained businessmen offered Aziz further justification for denouncing his political opponents.<sup>10</sup> He claimed that any parties that defended mismanagement, protected those who had defrauded the country or organized rallies for such purposes should not be called an opposition.

To consolidate his popularity, he began to portray himself as a ‘proper gentleman’ (*rājil naẓīf*), in stark contrast to his political opponents, who were defined as ‘corrupt politicians’ or, at best, their auxiliaries and accomplices.

Aziz alternated diatribes addressed to his opponents with reports of his campaign against the mismanagement of public funds, frequently returning to this strategy to assert his perseverance in this struggle and to highlight its achievements. It should be remembered that tools such as the General State Inspectorate and the Audit Office were by then conspicuously used for this purpose (El Haycen 2016: 188). Aziz assessed the results of the anti-mismanagement campaign in a speech delivered on 13 March 2010:

With regard to the fight against mismanagement and misappropriation of public funds, it is important to point out that 5,650,000,000 ouguiya [equivalent to over 15 million euros], squandered by certain people, has been recovered by the public treasury. We have recovered 600 million ouguiya from managers this year, and we will continue with these efforts. These measures will be improved, and this is a message to the civil servants. To them we say that henceforth, and within the framework of the 2009 and 2010 budget, any diversion will be treated with rigor, and the perpetrators will be required to refund the embezzled funds, sanctioned and brought to justice.

(Extract from a speech delivered during a meeting in Nouakchott’s southern suburb of Arafat on 13 March 2010; see Agence Mauritanienne d’Information 2010a)

This speech exhibits one of Aziz’s more characteristic rhetorical devices – his use of numbers. He often resorted to the manipulation of these ‘objective’ parameters, leading some in Nouakchott to call him *al-muḥaṣṣil* (‘the tax collector’). The abundant use of numbers in his speeches lent credibility to his assertions, not to mention that it obviously helped to impress his predominantly low-income audience, for whom even a few thousand ouguiyas represented an impressive amount. With that said, this period saw the retrocession of several billion ouguiyas to the state coffers (El Haycen 2016: 198).

Aziz enjoyed presenting himself as the protector and curator of the public treasury, overseeing it closely and keeping its records. The second part of the above excerpt shows that the president was not content to target only the top members of the administration, politicians and businessmen but was also focused on ‘managers’ – accountants, treasurers and financial officials. At this point in the campaign against mismanagement, he was on a treasure hunt for 600 million ouguiya. He warned that more effective measures would be taken and that enforcement actions would be strengthened, explaining that any case of misappropriation of public funds would lead to the exposure of the perpetrators and to a reimbursement of the funds without immunity from prosecution and criminal penalties. As he stated in yet another public address:

We have rigorously built momentum to ensure the sound and transparent management of public resources and state assets. In this sense, we have given firm instructions that the perpetrators of the crimes of misappropriation of public



funds, corruption, embezzlement and marginal practices, which are foreign to the traditions of our Muslim society, should be punished.

(Speech delivered by Aziz on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of independence on 27 November 2010; see Agence Mauritanienne d'Information 2010b)

Public Treasury officials were eventually condemned and imprisoned after the dismantlement of a large network engaged in the misappropriation of public funds in 2014.<sup>11</sup> This action gave some credit to Aziz's anti-corruption campaign, but most of the economic scandals made public during his presidency carried a strong political flavour. The judicial chronicles of Aziz's reign were in fact filled with financial scandals and the imprisonment of managers of some of the country's leading institutions, including Mauritanian Airlines, the board of directors of the savings bank CAPEC and the National Society of Import and Export (SONIMEX) (see Agence Mauritanienne d'Information 2008; Nouakchott Info 2011; Tawary 2016). These scandals were the subject of much gossip in the country and put president Aziz's anti-corruption initiatives in something of a good light. The end result of these initiatives was not impressive, however, as none of these scandals ultimately went to trial.

In addition to their significant media impact, these cases can also be understood as a coercive political strategy aimed at pushing opponents towards the presidential majority. As for those who were already members of his majority, this procedure forced them to openly state their loyalty and to assume an overtly militant posture. The wrongdoers were often obliged to repay the sums but, paradoxically, tended to be reinstated in their positions thereafter, as occurred with the Director of the ENS (École Normale Supérieure), for example. The same technique was replicated in the area of fiscal policy with more impressive political results, for instance with the chairman of the Mauritanian Leasing Company.

This process amounted to the clear instrumentalization of the judiciary system and other state institutions, with the particular aim of controlling or eliminating Aziz's political opponents. Aziz seemed determined to demonize an entire political class who, in his eyes, were responsible for all of Mauritania's problems. This campaign, while seriously handicapping the opposition, made Aziz appear as the chosen saviour of the country and the protector of the poor against 'a corrupt political class of exploiters'.

## A crusade against the political class

During a meeting in the populous Nouakchott suburb of Arafat, President Aziz continued his litany, affirming that the use of public funds for personal enrichment was a characteristic of previous political actors in Mauritania:

I thank you for your patience during the last thirty years, in which you lived in these conditions. I apologize to you on behalf of the previous regimes that have left you like this. They are the ones who are responsible for this situation.

(Agence Mauritanienne d'Information 2010a)

Aziz accused the entire political class who had preceded him of being responsible for the precarious conditions in working-class neighbourhoods and the hazardous areas established on illegally occupied land, which lacked water, electricity and sanitation. Aziz pushed this point by insisting that he was obliged to apologize on behalf of the previous governments who had kept the population in misery, thus underlining his solidarity with those who were suffering. Covering the last forty years, Aziz blamed government officials from the Ould Haidallah period (1979–1984) and those who worked with Ould Taya (1984–2005). He was particularly harsh on Ould Taya and his administration, from which many of the voices opposing Aziz stemmed. At the same time, he hit two birds with one stone by denouncing his political opponents and soliciting support from the population that had suffered as a result of the policies of previous governments, thus gaining popularity and legitimacy to the direct detriment of his political rivals. Reiterating his decisive action against previous governments, he said:

You will not be forced from the places you have lived for thirty years so that others can be assigned to them, and we will not abandon you (...) We will proceed with the opening of roads, the distribution of plots of land, the guaranteeing of safety ...  
(Agence Mauritanienne d'Information 2010a)

He thus specifies the lines of action that will remediate the injustices caused by past governments. Unlike what happened with previous governments, Aziz promised that populations would not be displaced from the occupied lands where they lived; more than that, land rights would finally be granted to them. The allocation of land rights was another of his promises and arguably the most popular measure of his presidency.<sup>12</sup>

Since the 1980s, thousands of precarious and illegal settlements, known locally as *gazra*, had been established on the flanks of the capital, representing one of the manifestations of the accelerated and anarchic urbanization that had been fuelled by a rural exodus and land speculation in the country (McDougall 2015). One can only imagine the high hopes raised among the inhabitants of these neighbourhoods upon hearing of the possibility of being granted a new plot of land or the immanent legalization of those they already occupied. Aziz's speech in fact provoked a new exodus that mobilized a considerable part of the population from the countryside, causing serious problems for public services as a result of a dramatic increase in the number of beneficiaries now settled in Nouakchott. One of the president's first speeches was delivered in the al-Hay Assakin neighbourhood, one of the capital's oldest *gazra*, solidifying this promise into yet another pillar of Aziz's rule that differentiated him from his predecessors, who had been unable to solve the problem:

If we compare this situation with what has prevailed in the past, we will find that billions of external funds have been misplaced in recent decades for the settlement of the *gazra* without any significant achievement. You also know that during the last eight years of this operation, all that was achieved was the displacement of poor people, leaving their dwellings open to the benefit of influential people who were close to the previous regimes.

(Agence Mauritanienne d'Information 2010a)

Here, Aziz argued that housing policies had not succeeded because of the misappropriation and poor governance that prevailed, despite the considerable financial resources available to his predecessors. Moreover, what had been achieved was only made possible in the context of patronage and favouritism. Aziz emphasized his role as 'protector' of the poor and champion of social justice – a commitment that he openly declared on various occasions: 'I tell you today that this situation is gone forever, and priority will be given to the poor' (Agence Mauritanienne d'Information 2010a).

In order to emphasize his role as the protector of the poor, he – a military man – spoke with disdain of the country's political class. He devoted an important part of his Arafat speech to criticizing senior officials of previous governments, blaming them for the dismal state of Mauritania, its social and political crises and the serious dysfunctions of the state. For him, all of Mauritania's ills originated in the actions of the previous powers, who had accumulated failures and bottlenecks.

It should be remembered that Mauritania experienced a major upheaval following the fall of Ould Taya in 2005, with the subsequent reorganization of political parties following a massive 'transhumance' to opposition parties. The plotters of the 2005 coup initially tried to 'deconstruct' the state party (PRDR) that had dominated the country during the Ould Taya era, which was emptied through the creation of so-called 'independent' parties (El Haycen 2016: 55). The PNDD-Adil was torn apart, and the elites of the Republican Democratic and Social Party (PRDS)/Republican Party for Democracy and Renewal (PRDR), 'the backpacks of the presidential parties', joined Aziz. The parliamentary battalion widened, and the 'slingers' were joined by former Ould Taya supporters such as Louleïd Ould Weddad and Kaba Ould Eleywa. The Hatem, Temam and Al Vadhila parties showed support for the new power. The Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD), led by Ahmed Ould Daddah – which many Europeans and even Mauritaniens viewed as 'the eternal opponent', the 'best candidate for a truly democratic presidency' – made a pact with Aziz and joined the pro-putschist movement (Antil 2009: 371).

The 2008 elections saw the ascension to power of former Ould Taya ministers and a large group of businessmen who had been in the opposition (El Haycen 2016: 155). By then, Aziz found himself confronting both the opposition parties (RFD, UFP, APP) and former members of the ADIL state party. This is possibly why Aziz decided to fight against the entire Mauritanian political class, assigning it responsibility for all of the country's tribulations and associating it with the classic opposition parties in order to reinforce his line of defence and his populist agenda. He highlighted the privileges enjoyed by this class, which were revoked in a restructuring of state spending through the adoption of new legislation.<sup>13</sup> This new law implied, among other things, the end of government subsidies for officials (meaning free utilities, including water, electricity, telephone and housing) and of governmental cars, which from then on would only be consigned to ministers: 'With regard to water and electricity [subsidized for government officials], this was terminated and is no longer the privilege of a minority' (Agence Mauritanienne d'Information 2010a). Moreover, the operating budgets of the state administration were drastically reduced. These measures, which clearly affected the governing officials' lifestyle, were presented by Aziz as a collective punishment

imposed on a corrupt political class. The removal of their privileges, often accompanied by public exposure, undoubtedly aimed to achieve more than the mere optimization of public spending.

With these actions, Aziz intended to persuade the population that the only difference between them and the class of privileged officials consisted in this series of advantages, which they enjoyed and which he abolished. Even more explicitly, Aziz claimed that whereas his predecessors had marginalized the population, his administration would be closer to the people. Here, Aziz would seem to have been tacitly exploiting the situation by, on the one hand, claiming to solve economic problems and, on the other, shifting the burden of responsibility onto his predecessors while playing them against the population. For the ordinary citizen, these populist measures – punishment inflicted on the upper-level administration, who were responsible for the dire condition of the popular classes – represented an achievement in themselves, and they were most likely the card that Aziz's populist instinct told him to play.

Aziz's denunciation of the political class led, in his own words, to a generalized opposition to his policies as he was allegedly trying to end mismanagement and to launch a reform of public institutions that would benefit the overall population, not only the political elite:

This may not be good for some who have benefited for decades from the wealth of the country and have made a profession of mismanagement to the detriment of the 3 million Mauritians. It is this minority who today cries and who says that the country is collapsing.

To them we say: You must be reasonable! If you have devastated the country for forty years, it is up to you now to beg forgiveness from the Mauritanian people, including those whom death might surprise while on this erroneous path.

(Agence Mauritanienne d'Information 2010a)

Such appeals can be interpreted as an incitement to rebellion against a political class who, according to Aziz, had squandered the country's wealth and were now lamenting the loss of their privileges. They are presented as perpetrators of crimes of which only 'the people' can absolve them.

Here, he again introduces the religious dimension, already perceptible in his mention of their need to repent. Aziz also decided to sermonize those 'whom death might surprise on their evil path'. He thus associates the officials who served under the old regimes with 'misguided souls' (*al-dāllīn*), a concept with a very strong resonance with disbelief among Muslims. His recourse to the religious dimension in reflects the mental universe of Mauritians and reveals a high level of opportunism on his part. Do we not say that 'words stop when they reach Allah' (*leklām yūgaḥ ilā al-ḥagg mūlāna*)?

In Mauritania, the best way to win any debate or controversy is to resort to religious arguments. One's opponent is thereby obliged to appeal to religious grounds, at the risk of being accused of apostasy. The most effective way to promote an opinion is to find a religious motive for it. In a deeply Islamized society, the mere mention of Islam alleviates all suspicion and attracts immediate support. In all mobilization campaigns,

it is always the religious argument that represents the last resort and the most effective weapon in guaranteeing the support of the population. Because of this, religious arguments were decisive in shifting public opinion on female genital mutilation. Similarly, very recently, the speech of the ulemas referring to the plague epidemics during the time of the prophet Muḥammad, played a large part in raising awareness about the spread of Covid-19.

By appealing to the religious dimension, Aziz therefore sought to strike a chord in the Mauritanian 'subconscious'. This Manichean understanding of reality distinguishes between those who follow the path of the good (*al-rāshidūn*) and the lost (*al-qāllīn*), who follow no path and necessarily choose evil. The association of corrupt politicians (and by extension the old regime) with the 'damned' and with disbelievers is certainly the best way to articulate their downfall. Globally, the invocation of the religious dimension and its concepts allows Aziz to also appear as a champion of Islam.

### A call to young people

The struggle against the 'old' political class led Aziz to claim the creation of a 'new' political class, calling for young people to get involved in political life. In most of his speeches, he repeatedly stressed the slogan 'rejuvenate the political class' in order to ensure the succession of a 'deliquescent' political class that had constantly shown its shortcomings and failures.<sup>14</sup> Following online consultations involving thousands of young people in March 2013 (on media uses in Africa, see, for example, Hackett and Soares 2015), a large event was organized under the patronage of Aziz, who occasionally entered into direct dialogue with youth representatives. At the end of this process in 2015, a High Council of Youth (HCY; HCJ abbreviation in French) was created. This structure was placed under the direct control of the Presidency of the Republic, and its president was raised to the rank of minister, with all its advantages, while the thirteen members of the HCY executive office were made deputies in the prime minister's office.

Despite its incorporation into the ranks of the state apparatus, the HCY had no impact on the actions of the government, and no executive tasks were ever assigned to it. Although some observers, like Ould Sneib (Mohamed Sneiba 2013) viewed this approach as an attempt to take the youth out of the streets (during a period that coincided with the civil unrest associated with the so-called Arab Spring; for other interpretations of Aziz's attempts to nullify the influence of the Arab Spring in Mauritania, see Makhmutova 2020: 608), it seems to be in line with Aziz's strategy of 'cutting the grass under the feet' of the old ruling class in order to neutralize it while dismantling the opposition by poaching some of its more prominent leaders. As a result of this continued undermining, the opposition failed to run a single candidate in the presidential election of June 2019 (Sahara Media 2019), and several of its top leaders rallied with the presidential majority, while others supported a former Ould Taya prime minister for president.

To complete his battle against the political class, President Aziz worked hard to rid the administration of the old guard and their allies. Through the demonization of

the former leaders of the country, Aziz associated all of his political opponents with administrations formed by 'incompetent old men' (al-Akhbar 2012). In their place, he often installed young people who lacked previous experience in the public sector. The opposition continuously denounced this scuttling of the administration (Antil 2019: 280).

In full accordance with the slogan 'rejuvenate the political class', young ministers such as Amal Mint Maouloud and Ould Abdel Fettah (born in 1983 and 1977, respectively) were appointed to the government. In the eyes of the president, the recruitment of inexperienced staff had the advantage of making them particularly malleable and well suited to his authoritarian paternalism. Such actions made Aziz's government the most stable ever known in the country, and the longevity of the ministers was exceptional, as they represented, one might argue, 'smokescreens' for Aziz's own exercise of power.

Alan Antil has stressed the heightened levels of control exercised by Aziz, the consolidation of his inner circle, and especially 'the low turnover of ministers and their low decisional weight'. Antil also highlights one of the characteristics of Aziz's appointment techniques, which distinguishes him from his predecessors:

The opportunistic loyalty of men no longer operates by offering them *carte blanche* to public funds, but rather by maintaining pressure on their necessary probity. In case of "error"—real or fake—they are immediately put to the media and legal guillotine.

(Antil 2014: 278)

Unlike Ould Taya, who offered his ministers and administrators the opportunity to embezzle public funds with impunity, Aziz used coercion, and his collaborators could only claim the crumbs he portioned to them. Far from scrutinizing this attitude from the perspective of moral integrity, Aziz's opponents justified this through his particular relationship with money and his propensity for personal enrichment. Another of Aziz's well-known traits was his public scrutiny of his ministers through the active exposure of the slightest of slip-ups, which forced them to choose inaction out of fear of making missteps.

Because of this, the ministers only had symbolic power, while the administration, stripped of its financial means and its more efficient human resources, sunk into paralysis, thus opening the way to the only available recourse: President Aziz himself was to take on the tasks of the most modest officials in the administrative hierarchy. Those with any sort of grievance would then have to turn to the sole 'manager' of the country. Whether the problem was in downtown Nouakchott or in the most remote corner of Mauritania, it could only be resolved by taking direct recourse to the president. Aziz's visits to the countryside provided another opportunity for citizens to talk to him directly about their problems during private hearings or to hand him their complaints when he appeared at public gatherings. This approach to power, as we know, can easily be manipulated by actors with privileged access to the administration, thus favouring corruption.

Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem (1999) has emphasized the exaggerated personification of state power in Mauritania and the fact that 'the different regimes are systematically

identified in collective memory as “the epoch of so and so” – this even more so for Aziz: Whereas his predecessors had sometimes strengthened the administration, or at least allowed their collaborators room for manoeuvre, Aziz combined the executive and the administrative function of government in a single person, thus becoming the state itself. From the ordinary citizen’s point of view, only President Aziz was likely to find a solution to their problems. He thus wanted to take the place of the entire state apparatus, to intervene in all levels of the administration, and to disavow it. This *l’état c’est moi* approach was also evident in his personal overseeing of all aspects of the public budget (Antil and Lesourd 2014: 277–8).

These actions made President Aziz the sole ‘master’ of the country, with a neutralized political opposition and young and inexperienced collaborators who would never aspire to overshadow him. It is therefore legitimate to ask whether the ultimate goal of his presidency – facilitated by his efforts to demonize the old political class and to surround himself with neophyte government officials – was not simply to secure a monopoly on power while obtaining total control over the country’s resources.

## Conclusion

Aziz’s strategy therefore consisted first of demonizing the old elites by accusing them of corruption and positioning them as the cause of Mauritania’s problems. At the same time, his speeches continually included a call for the political engagement of the youth to give some semblance of coherence to his propaganda calling for the need to replace the old elite. This call was merely a tactic to co-opt inexperienced but dedicated staff, which suited Aziz’s unquenchable thirst for material gain. This was a component of the populist character of Aziz’s policies, which had been revealed during his first term in office. Nonetheless, Aziz was quick to change his approach by returning, paradoxically, to a better disposition towards the old political elite.

Indeed, after a short period of political turbulence, he rapidly secured the legitimization of his positions. Aziz started by making concessions to the political class that had preceded him in office, especially towards some of its more notable actors, who had proved quite useful during the electoral period. He also put his fight against misappropriation on hold by keeping in office figures known to have diverted public funds. At the same time, he vigorously pursued the dismantling of the opposition parties, notably by offering future promotions and government posts to defectors. Finally, Aziz balanced his fight against the old political elites with their partial rehabilitation, which came with political dividends. These two apparently irreconcilable processes can hardly be acknowledged as signs of democratization. One might even argue the opposite: that they helped the executive – mostly represented by the figure of Aziz – to steadily strengthen its grip on power.

President Aziz sought a third term in office and gradually implemented the necessary political and legal tools to achieve this outcome. He continued to take advantage of the options available to him in order to obtain a third presidential mandate, despite the fact that the Constitution forbade it. He vehemently questioned this constitutional



clause and encouraged his ministers and collaborators to openly state that the president deserved a third term in office and that the articles of the Constitution were insignificant details that could easily be curbed. It was only after a dramatic reversal – announced in a presidential statement read on state television, in the absence of the president (who was visiting the United Arab Emirates) – that those campaigning for a third term were formally ordered to suspend their actions, paving the way for elections that included a (reluctant) candidate who was part of Aziz's establishment.

In general terms, the political practices of President Aziz were largely marked by his authoritarianism and by Machiavellian political tactics that often ran contrary to the spirit of democracy. Rather than leading Mauritania towards democracy, the political regime under Aziz had an authoritarian character that makes it appropriate to describe it as either a 'deficient democracy' or a form of 'competitive authoritarianism'.

Nevertheless, Aziz's Mauritania remains an interesting case study that can be drawn on by different fields (particularly political studies), as evidenced by Ould Cheikh's research on the 'mirror of the Sultan' (2019), Ould Ahmed Salem's work on new conceptions and perceptions (1998, 1999, 2020), Villasanté's studies on the involvement of tribal identities (2013), Lesourd and Antil's research on Aziz's mode of governance (2009, 2014), and Pettigrew and Evrard's (2019) work on the Mauritanian political system.

## Notes

- 1 Immediately following his takeover and the overthrowing of Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, Aziz found himself ostracized by the international community, and an internal front was set up for the first time to thwart military action.
- 2 As a colonel, in 2005 Aziz took part in a coup that overthrew President Ould Taya, becoming one of the strongmen of the transitional 'Military Committee for Justice and Democracy'. He later became the chief of staff of the elected President Ould Abdallahi. Ould Abdallahi promoted Aziz to General but in 2008 dismissed him due to his alleged involvement in a parliamentary vote of no confidence against Ould Abdallahi. Supported by the military and the parliament, Aziz would go on to overthrow President Ould Abdallahi and was thus instrumental in the restoration of national unity (which he had previously disrupted). He ran for presidential office and won the election in 2009. He stepped down from the role of president in 2019 after two terms (see N'Diaye 2009).
- 3 The *ḥarāṭīn* (a significant segment of the Hassaniyya-speaking populations of Mauritania) are historically associated with a dependent/servile status. Their current mobilization has challenged the country's political equilibrium. See the chapter by David Malluche in this volume for a more in-depth analysis.
- 4 El Haycen's book *Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz: Construire la Mauritanie Autrement* is dedicated, in the author's own words, to the 'simplified reconstitution of the political events that Mauritania had known from 2008, the date that marks the beginning of the political rise of President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz', but its panegyric character makes it useful only for illustrating factual aspects.
- 5 My translation from the French. All translations are my own.



- 6 Antil (2019) has emphasized Aziz's 'ability to sell himself as a good communicator'. He is probably the most public Mauritanian President, organizing frequent meetings with the press which he called 'the meeting with the people' (*Liqa' al-sha'b*), a sort of press conference where he engages in disjointed conversation with a panel of journalists on various issues, replicating a model that is well known, for example, in parts of South America.
- 7 Ironically, in 2020 it was Aziz's turn to be investigated for 'suspected embezzlement' (<https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210311-mauritanian-ex-president-mohamed-ould-abdel-aziz-charged-with-corruption>).
- 8 See the AMI website, <https://fr.ami.mr/Depeche-9292.html>.
- 9 Yahya Ould Ahmed Waghef, Ould Cheikh Abdellahi's prime minister, was arrested during the coup of 6 August 2008. He was accused of selling a stock of spoiled rice to traders during his time as the head of the Food Aid Commission (CSA). He was freed a few months later (Tawary 2016).
- 10 Leaders of the opposition (RFD/Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques and UFP/Union des Forces Progressistes) organized support rallies for the detainees and publicly expressed their support for the detained businessmen, denouncing an action which could have serious economic repercussions.
- 11 See for example the journal *Points Chauds* at: <https://pointschauds.info/fr/arrestation-a-nouadhibou-de-cinq-comptables-de-la-tresorerie-regionale-suite-a-la-disparition-dune-importante-somme/>.
- 12 Land speculation is among the more profitable enrichment schemes in Nouakchott. Land sales have transformed the lives of many of the capital's inhabitants, turning what were once very poor families into wealthy communities overnight. This explains the enormous hope and high expectations that followed President Aziz's promise.
- 13 'Decree No. 2010-033 of 9 February 2010 on housing allowance, transport and water and electricity and amending certain provisions of Decree No. 2006-003 / PM amending the value of the index point, flat rate increase to benefit of categories C and D abrogation and modification of certain provisions of the Decree No. 99-01 of 11 January 1999 and its modifying texts' (*Journal Officiel de la République Islamique de Mauritanie* (2010): 506).
- 14 Ibid.

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