

Reference id 09NOUAKC aka Wikileaks id #202656

Subject The Elephant In The Room: Ethnic Relations After The Coup

Origin [Embassy Nouakchott](#) (Mauritania)

Cable time Thu, 16 Apr 2009 13:12 UTC

Classification CONFIDENTIAL

Source <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/04/09NOUAKCHOTT277.html>

References [09NOUAKCHOTT251](#), [09NOUAKCHOTT271](#)

History First published on Thu, 1 Sep 2011 23:24 UTC

VZCZCXRO1560 PP RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHMR RUEHPA RUEHRN RUEHTRO DE RUEH NK #0277/01 1061312 ZNY
 CCCCC ZZH P 161312Z APR 09 FM AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8335 INFO
 RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE
 RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0607 RUEHDO/AMEMBASSY DOHA 0529 RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0591
 RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 2134 RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0939 RUEHPG/AMEMBASSY PRAGUE 0164
 RHMFISS/COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
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 1048

Hide header C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 NOUAKCHOTT 000277 SIPDIS E.O. 12958:
 DECL: 04/16/2019 TAGS: PGOV [[Internal Governmental Affairs](#)], PHUM [[Human Rights](#)],
 KDEM [[Democratization](#)] SUBJECT: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: ETHNIC RELATIONS AFTER THE COUP REF:
 A. [NOUAKCHOTT 251](#) B. [NOUAKCHOTT 271](#) Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for
 reasons 1.4 (b and d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Mauritania's political crisis keeps stirring longstanding ethnic rivalries. The media talks about a "war" between junta leader General Abdel Aziz and anti-coup Haratine political leaders. Some of the leaders themselves describe it as the regime's "permanent" war with anyone refusing to cooperate with the Moor's Arab national identity project. Haratine discontent is also shared by the Afro-Mauritanian population. Despite Aziz's efforts to co-opt Afro-Mauritanians through political appointments, the speedy return of the refugees, the resolution of the "passif humanitaire" and promises of better services to poor communities, many believe most main issues remain unsolved. For Kane Hamidou Baba and Ibrahima Sarr, respected Afro-Mauritanian opposition leaders who have accepted to participate in General Aziz's elections, the real problem is political under-representation of Haratines and Afro-Mauritanians -- perceived by many, despite the lack of reliable demographical statistics, as representing the majority of the population. Both groups want acknowledgment, inclusion, and equal access to power and opportunities. Sociologist Cheikh Saad Bouh Camara thinks that Nasserists and Baathists are purposely exacerbating ethnic divisions and obstructing national unity. These pan-Arab elements, who believe in white Moor supremacy, fear a coalition between the Haratines and the Afro-Mauritanians that would threaten White Moor power. Past governments have tried to build a divide among Haratines and Afro-Mauritanians by, for instance, language programs that taught Haratines Arabic and Afro-Mauritanians French. This strategy has often worked as Haratines often self-identify as "Arab" before "Black" and often do not rally to what are seen as Afro-Mauritanian causes. Discussions about the "passif humanitaire" -- formerly a taboo subject -- and about what Mauritanians refer to as "the Obama phenomenon" make White Moors increasingly uneasy. In the absence of a more inclusive political approach -- that an authoritarian regime is unlikely to provide -- exacerbated frustrations could lead to unrest and, potentially, more violence. End summary.

----- AT WAR WITH THE HARATINES -----

¶2. (U) Newspaper L'Eveil Hebdo published March 30 an article titled "Trench Warfare" that states General Aziz is at war with Haratine leaders and staunch coup detractors like Samory Ould Beye (labor union leader), Boubacar Ould Messaoud (president of SOS Esclaves), Boydiel Ould Houmeid (former minister secretary general to President Abdallahi), and Messaoud Ould

Boulkheir (National Assembly president). Note: Haratines are black Mauritians who were (and some still are) slaves to the Moors and who were raised in the Moor language, culture and tradition. They are also referred to as Black Moors although some, through intermarriage, may be lighter-skinned than some White Moors -- linkages to a slave past are more determinant than skin color. They are among the poorest and most underprivileged elements of society and have traditionally supported the White Moor agendas. Nevertheless, since the 70s, Haratine leaders have developed a strong political conscience and have attempted to assert themselves through the abolitionist movement. End note.

¶13. (C) The week of April 1, Boubacar Messaoud was singled-out by white Moor police inspector Mohamed Ould Nejib and beaten unconscious by the regime's anti-riot police in a peaceful demonstration. Messaoud Ould Boulkheir was tear-gassed during the same demonstration (Ref A). On April 8, only a week after the demonstration, the press stated Ould Nejib was rewarded with a promotion for his role in the

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in 1966 and again during the passif humanitaire events of the late eighties and early nineties. End note) To illustrate his point, Baba stressed that out of 90 young recruits to the Army's officer candidate school only one was Afro-Mauritanian. Likewise, only 18 out of 95 parliamentarians are Afro-Mauritanian and Haratine, which shows the National Assembly does not reflect Mauritania's electoral composition because much of the population, concentrated in the South, is Afro-Mauritanian or Haratine. Baba stated he was happy with the resolution of "passif humanitaire," even though he believed it was only a beginning.

¶18. (C) PolOff and PolAsst met April 13 with Ibrahima Sarr, a Pulaar opposition leader and president of the AJD-MR party who was the first to announce his candidacy for the June 6 junta-orchestrated election. For Sarr, the problem of power sharing remains Mauritania's main issue and the main obstacle to democracy. According to Sarr, the Moors as a minority have amassed all the power and influence whereas the Afro-Mauritians and Haratines have been relegated to a minor, almost nonexistent role. Sarr believes the Moors have undertaken a conscious, planned effort to exclude Afro-Mauritians and Haratines from the Mauritanian national project by curtailing their access to the administration, the military, education, health, land, the civil registry, radio and television. For this reason, Sarr rejects the current constitution as he believes it does not reflect the true and diverse face of the Mauritanian nation. Sarr's political platform is based on these identity issues. He calls for a revision of Mauritania's identity; the officialization of other languages like Halpulaar, Soninke and Wolof; political power-sharing between all the communities; and the abolition of slavery (Ref B). Sarr stresses the symbolic importance of Ba M'Bare's presidency. Even if short lived and devoid of power, he believes M'Bare's opportunity to preside over the country is a tremendous political success for Afro-Mauritians that will shift mindsets and lead people into accepting Afro-Mauritians in power. He stated General Aziz had encountered opposition from his tribe about M'Bare's appointment but that he moved forward with it. Comment: Aziz was probably weighing the value of a minority appointment in the eyes of the international community. End comment. Sarr also commended Aziz's resolution of the passif humanitaire, saying it was a difficult question because two torturers were at the High State Council. He's aware of the limits of General Aziz's plan but thinks this is a base Afro-Mauritians can build on to achieve recognition and justice.

¶19. (C) PolAsst met with PLEJ president and FNDD activist Ba Mamadou Alassane on April 14. Alassane stated he had relatives who were killed during the "passif humanitaire." As a Pulaar and anti-coup politician, he was not surprisingly disapproving of Aziz's unilateral efforts to resolve the "passif humanitaire." He said that Aziz was very close to President Taya (who was president during the "passif"), and that several of the colonels on the current High State Council were directly implicated in the killing of Afro-Mauritians. Whereas President Abdallahi had been trying to find a genuine consensual resolution to the issue, Aziz had merely bought out susceptible Afro-Mauritanian leaders in the South in an attempt to lend credibility to his "solution." "No one has been tried or judged," or held responsible, Alassane reasoned, so there could be no "resolution" at this time. Alassane also noted that

many Afro-Mauritanian community leaders were just "opportunists" searching for posts or other tangible rewards, whereas the masses as a whole rejected Aziz out of hand. When asked about Ibrahim Sarr, Alassane stated that he had lost much credibility among Afro-Mauritanians since he had begun dealing with Aziz, and that the "majority" of Pulaars were no longer with him. ¶10. (C) In an article published April 14, newspaper Le Renouveur highlights the role played by Afro-Mauritanian leaders like Ibrahima Sarr and Kane Hamidou Baba in providing NOUAKCHOTT 00000277 004 OF 005 legitimacy to Aziz. President of the Senate Ba M'Bare is also considered "a puppet" of the junta. Comment: Afro-Mauritanian leaders like Sarr, Kane Hamidou Baba and Professor Camara are aware of the limits of General Aziz's actions on behalf of the Afro-Mauritanian community and of the junta's unilateral march towards consolidating the coup. Nevertheless, they favor a logic of participation as opposed to a logic of boycott. Some Afro-Mauritanians are so power hungry that they will take any opportunity to access power -- even that afforded by a dictator eager to consolidate his power and willing to cater to disparate groups like Baathists, Iranians and Libyans. As many Afro-Mauritanians have stated, they are willing to "play with the devil" if he will have them, in the hopes that they can beat him at his own game. End comment.

-- ---- PAN-ARABISTS FEAR HARATINES AND AFRO-MAURITANIANS -----

¶11. (C) PolOff met April 6 with Professor Cheikh Saad Bouh Camara, reputed Afro-Mauritanian sociologist of both Haratine and Afro-Mauritanian descent, to inquire about the junta and ethnic relations. Professor Camara's candidacy to the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) had been opposed by many on the grounds that he would be "one Afro-Mauritanian too many in the government" (Ref A).

¶12. (C) Professor Camara stated that the coup d'etat had given pan-Arabist Nasserists and Baathists -- two groups whose influence has been declining -- an opportunity to make a comeback in the political scene. These elements were behind the interruption of relations with Israel. Nasserists and Baathists feel threatened by General Aziz's resolution of the "passif humanitaire" as many of them took part in the purges. The "passif humanitaire" was a taboo issue in Mauritanian society and the fact that the establishment recognized the events did not sit well with this group and has caused extreme apprehension. Comment: Camara's assessment of the passif humanitaire is similar to Sarr's and Baba's. These Afro-Mauritanians believe Aziz's acknowledgment of what happened is a huge step forward and, even though imperfect, something Mauritanians can build on. End comment.

¶13. (C) Camara thinks that Arab extremists are afraid of the triumph of democracy and of black accession to power. "Fear has changed sides," he stated, "now they are afraid of us." For Camara, Obama's election has been pivotal in stirring Haratine and Afro-Mauritanian hopes. President Obama, a bi-racial individual who has succeeded on his own merits, has become an inspiration and a model they can copy. These groups are waiting for a "Mauritanian Mohamed Ould Obama." During the transition of 2005, traditionally under-represented groups had the opportunity to voice their opinion. They cherish democracy. Comment: Camara's assessment of the hard-line Baathist constituency behind Aziz is difficult to square with his willingness to accept the leadership of the CENI. Senior LES employees who studied under Camara and considered him a mentor are now deeply disappointed -- believing he has finally decided to ensure his retirement than stand on principle. End Comment.

¶14. (C) Camara said that the Moors feared a Haratine/Afro-Mauritanian alliance. These groups, according to Camara, constitute a majority in Mauritania and, if democracy were to follow its due course, would take over through the ballot box. The coup has unified people. The coup has brought Haratines from different political parties together, for example the Haratines of Tawassoul and the APP. Comment: The APP political party is a coalition of Nasserists and Haratines. Despite supposed frictions within the party on the wake of Qadhafi's visit and rumors of a split, it still remains strongly anti-coup and an example of how Nasserists and Haratines can join forces. NOUAKCHOTT 00000277 005 OF 005

¶15. (C) Comment: Racial and ethnic relations in Mauritania are extremely complex. White Moors reign supreme in this society and inequality is tangible -- there is an all too visible imbalance between the population's composition and the circles of power. Some think the coup d'etat against President Abdallahi was the White Moors' ultimate attempt to defend their absolute power against the pressures of a more inclusive and transparent democratic order. Surprisingly, General Aziz, by appropriating President Abdallahi's political platform and applying it unilaterally, has broken taboos in Mauritanian society that nobody thought could be tackled. The symbolism of a Moor regime leader acknowledging the "passif humanitaire" and allowing an Afro-Mauritanian to direct the country even if only for 45 days is a huge leap forward for Mauritanian minds. Sadly, these advances have been made in an entirely unilateral and unconstitutional manner. Lack of representation and exclusion lead to frustrations that can become hard to control -- especially if one takes into account Mauritania's still recent history of ethnic violence. If we add Mauritania's growing disenfranchised youth into the mix, all the ingredients for renewed ethnic strife may be present. The impossibility, under authoritarian regimes and at the doors of the 21st century, of finding their rightful place in the nation could be the spark that lights the Haratine and Afro-Mauritanian ethnic fire. In its efforts to bring democracy to Mauritania, the United States should seek to support leaders and initiatives that include and celebrate Mauritania's diversity and that contribute to a more equitable nation building effort. End comment. HANKINS