

## Miracle in Mauritania

By Jesse Sage and Nasser Weddady  
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It has been a sobering year for Middle East reform.

Sectarian strife in Iraq has largely silenced calls for democracy to replace dictatorship. Lebanon, whose March 14 movement once seemed to herald an "Arab Spring," has descended into stalemate punctuated by assassinations. Across the region, grass-roots openings achieved by activists are being rapidly rolled back by autocrats who no longer fear international censure. But just off the international community's radar screen, new hope for reform is blossoming in a most unlikely place: Mauritania. The small North African Arab League state has just experienced an event unprecedented in the region—peaceful transfer of power via open elections.

The United States - which has invested capital and lives promoting liberty in the Arab world with limited success - should be paying closer attention.

Mauritania seems a surprising poster child for Arab reform. Dominated by an Arab minority for centuries, Mauritania is the world's last outpost of chattel slavery, with thousands of black Africans making up a slave caste. Others have faced harsh persecution, most notably the more than 10,000 blacks deported in 1989.

Like fellow members of the Arab League, Mauritania has suffered under dictatorship for decades. Most Mauritania have never lived under an elected ruler. Colonel Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya ran the country since a 1984 coup, repeatedly rigging presidential elections. When a 2005 military coup drove him out, few believed the junta leaders' promise to hold elections within two years.

Yet in March, the first round of elections went off without incident. The second round, between the top two candidates, was decided 52 percent to 48 percent.

In Mauritania, the openness of the election was made more impressive by a flourishing civil society. The local press, for instance, operated without censorship. Both presidential campaigns blasted reporters for "unfair" coverage, a sign that journalists were not muzzled.

Civic groups also pressed their demands: ending corruption, repatriating deported black Africans, and abolishing slavery. Just a few years ago, merely discussing these topics landed activists in jail. Yet, at a recent symposium, government representatives acknowledged the existence of slavery and the need for action to stop it.

Addressing once-taboo subjects is now a political necessity. During an April presidential debate carried live on television (also unheard of in the Arab world), candidates argued in both French and Arabic, an unprecedented gesture to the previously marginalized black African population that does not speak Arabic. Both candidates promised to end slavery, and one even outlined a timeline for repatriating

deportees.

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Many analysts fear that Arab elections simply empower Islamists, exchanging ostensibly secular strongmen for repressive theocrats. Mauritania's Muslim Brotherhood does share the ideological platform of its Egyptian counterpart and receives funding from the Gulf. Though blocked from running as a party, the Brotherhood openly rallied behind several candidates. None fared well, suggesting that Islamists enjoy the greatest appeal under repressive conditions.

Perhaps the most telling sign of Mauritania's "Desert Spring" is popular discontent with the new government. Mauritians are already complaining about the election results, and state TV recently ran a comedy sketch mocking the new president. When these same comedians lampooned Colonel Taya on air in 1989, their show was immediately canceled.

People do not complain without reason. The military, security forces, and even the new administration are staffed by many of the unsavory characters who enforced Colonel Taya's rule. The question remains whether Mauritania will see real change or simply a recalibration of the old system.

One group of observers has already pronounced its verdict. No prominent Arab leaders attended President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi's inauguration, and Mauritanian officials were shunned at the Arab League summit in Saudi Arabia. Mauritania has set a new standard of accountability and transparency for the Middle East - bad news for the region's rulers, who had seemingly managed to outlast the "fad" of reform. The proverbial Arab street, though, is inspired, and the Mauritanian precedent is regularly invoked on Al-Jazeera.

Arab leaders might seek to ignore Mauritania, but the international community should not. While U.S. aid, for instance, consists mostly of Pentagon funds for the Sahel anti-terror initiative, little funding has been directed to Mauritanian civil society. Such aid ought to be proportionate to real progress on the ground. No other Arab League state has come close to Mauritania's recent achievements.

Even more importantly, private U.S. organizations and foundations should assist Mauritanian civil society in its struggle to address the country's substantial challenges. Building a genuinely open society in Mauritania - one that can continue to serve as an inspiration for the Arab world - will require substantial international support from both governments and activists. Now is the time to stand up for reform.

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