



MAURITANIA'S ISLAMISTS

Alex Thurston

MIDDLE EAST | MARCH 2012

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

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Summary

Islamists have become an important political force in Mauritania since formal Islamist associations first emerged in the 1970s. Islamist activism has contributed to the ongoing Islamization of Mauritanian society, as is evident from the proliferation of mosques and Islamic associations in the capital, Nouakchott, and elsewhere. In the 1990s, political liberalization allowed Islamists to participate in elections as independents, and since its legalization in 2007, Tewassoul, the strongest Islamist party in Mauritania today, has become a significant minority voice in the country's politics and has built ties with Islamists elsewhere in the Arab world. These moderate Islamists who participate in elections hold different beliefs and goals from Mauritania's jihadist fringe.

Overall, Mauritanian Islamism does not currently pose a threat to the United States. The mainstream of the movement appears committed to democracy and, even so, is unlikely to take power. Islamist parties like Tewassoul have never captured a large share of the vote in elections, and moderate Islamist leaders have explicitly rejected using violence to take over the state. Indeed, the United States may even find an upside to the Islamists' rise: Mainstream Islamist leaders publicly condemn the Muslim terrorist group Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which the Mauritanian government has been combating since 2005.

Mauritanian Islamism's Mixed Implications

Kidnappings of Westerners and embassy bombings have made Mauritania, along with the broader Sahel region, a source of concern for American and European governments worried about the potential spread of transnational terrorist movements in Africa. Western policymakers have different perspectives on Mauritania's problems. Some believe that the army's willingness to hunt terrorists both domestically and in neighboring Mali makes the country a strong partner for U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts in the region. Others fear that Mauritania's turbulent politics (the country has suffered two coups in the past decade) make it unstable, and thus fertile ground for Muslim extremist recruitment.

The strength of Mauritanian Islamism contributes to such fears. Legalized Islamist parties are on the rise, and their popular appeal is evident in Islamist leaders' electoral victories, frequent media appearances, and ability to organize mass anti-Israel demonstrations. Islamists' political gains, moreover, have gone hand in hand with a broader Islamization of society, as seen in the spread of mosques and Islamic associations in the capital, Nouakchott, and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, Mauritanian Islamist organizations do not currently threaten the United States. The mainstream Islamist movement appears committed to democracy and is unlikely to capture power, whether violently or at the ballot box. Indeed, the Islamists' rising profile may even have some positive implications for the United States: Mainstream Islamist leaders publicly condemn the Muslim terrorist group Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which Mauritania's government has been combating since 2005. By taking part in government efforts to reform militants, Islamists have helped reduce AQIM's recruiting potential. Moderate Islamists also strengthen Mauritania's flawed democracy by channeling popular anger into participation in mainstream politics.

Washington should also be interested in Mauritanian Islamists for what they can reveal about anti-Western sentiments within an energetic and influential segment of society primarily composed of young, educated, urban activists. This constituency, for instance, opposed Mauritania's 1999 recognition of Israel and helped spur the government's decision to break ties with Jerusalem in 2009. And although it supports the objective of defeating AQIM, it has also

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Pressuring the Mauritanian regime to override Islamists' concerns could increase anti-Western sentiments among both Islamists and the population as a whole.

criticized the government's acceptance of Western help in counterterrorism. The lesson for the United States is clear: Pressuring the Mauritanian regime to override this constituency's concerns could increase anti-Western sentiments among both Islamists and the population as a whole.

Islamists also participate in global religious networks, extending their relevance beyond Mauritania. Islamists sometimes mediate relations between the state and foreign Islamic groups, and as the fallout from the 2011 Arab uprisings alters North African politics, they will likely forge tighter bonds with Islamists in Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Noting which bonds they do strengthen will help policymakers understand and anticipate broader political changes in the Arab world.

Mauritanian Islamists See the State as a Vehicle for the Islamization of Society

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania has long worked to juggle its Arab identity, Islamic character, and Western ties. This juggling act has created opportunities for Islamists to pursue their defining goal: further integrating Islamic values into policymaking—especially in law, education, and foreign policy. Although nearly all Mauritania are Muslims, they are not all Islamists. Islamists differ from other Muslims in that they make Islam the basis of a political ideology and urge the state—rather than just individual Muslims, the scholars, or the community—to enact policies that will more deeply Islamize society. Islamists want more public piety, more mosques and Islamic associations, and a higher profile for Islamic scholars in media and public life. But they also want a government that enforces Islamic law and promotes Islamic beliefs, as well as a foreign policy that shuns reliance on non-Muslim states in favor of greater solidarity with the Muslim world.

Islamists in Mauritania are a broad group. They interpret Islamic principles differently, and they favor different means for Islamizing state and society:

- *Mainstream political Islamists* want to achieve power through elected office and use the state to enforce Islamic law, promote Islam in public life, and craft a more “Islamic” foreign policy.
- *Salafis*, on the other hand, hold the theological viewpoint that contemporary society should conform to the model of the early Muslim community in Medina. In Mauritania, Salafis and mainstream political Islamists have formed tactical alliances, with some Salafis supporting Islamists' electoral campaigns and political organizations. But other Salafis disdain Islamists'

participation in formal politics as a corrupt, worldly pursuit. These Salafis prefer to reform society through sermons, instruction, and charitable work, not through electoral campaigns and political protests.

- *Jihadis* advocate the use of violence against political authorities in the name of Islam. Jihadism is a more extreme form of Islamism. Some jihadis embrace Salafi theology, but not all Salafis are jihadis; nor are all jihadis Salafis. Moderate Islamism, which seeks change through nonviolent activism, remains distinct from violent jihadism.

In addition to its interactions with Salafism and jihadism, mainstream Mauritanian Islamism has been shaped by frequently negative, but sometimes close, interactions with the state. At times, state repression has pushed Islamists underground; in other moments, Islamists have been able to broadcast their ideas to society by working together with political authorities. The idea that Mauritania is an “Islamic Republic,” as its official name declares, has been particularly important to this relationship. Precisely what such a republic might be has been neither completely clear nor uncontested in the country’s political life.

Rulers’ attempts to define the place of Islam in society have at times competed with, and at other times borrowed from, Islamist visions of government. For example, the present administration’s diplomatic breach with Israel helped bring Islamist positions into mainstream politics, but it also forced Islamists to distinguish themselves from their political rivals. In other words, repression has generally strengthened Islamism, while co-optation has sometimes weakened it.

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Social Change and Foreign Influence Spurred Early Islamist Mobilization

Political and demographic changes dating back to the 1970s nurtured the growth of Islamism in Mauritania. Drought pushed nomads into cities, increasing the number of urban dwellers in Mauritania from 8 percent of the population in 1962 to 25 percent in 1975. Urbanization gave rise to new civic associations, including the country’s first Islamist organization, the Jemaa Islamiyya (Islamic Association), a Nouakchott-based group sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood.

A 1978 military coup against President Moktar Ould Daddah, who had ruled Mauritania since its independence from France in 1960, brought further opportunities for Islamists. Daddah had fostered Islamic values in government and education, and military leaders continued and strengthened this commitment. Colonel Mohamed Haidalla, who ruled from 1980 to 1984, introduced

Sharia (Islamic law) provisions with the assistance of the Jemaa Islamiyya. Colonel Maaouya Ould Taya, president from 1984 to 2005, rolled back elements of Sharia but continued to stress the Islamic character of the state. State efforts to promote Islamic values—for example, the state-run Institut Supérieur d'Études et de Recherche Islamiques (High Institute of Islamic Study and Research, ISERI), founded in 1979—helped create a new generation of Islamist leaders.

Islamists' early experiences in politics divided the newly emerging class of Islamist leaders in Jemaa Islamiyya and in the growing network of Salafi mosques and organizations in the capital. Dissatisfied with Jemaa Islamiyya's closeness to the state, a group of teachers and imams (Islamic clergy) formed Hasim (Harakat al Siyasiyya al Islamiyya fi Muritaniyya, the Islamic Political

Movement in Mauritania) in the mid-1980s. Hasim advocated nonviolent democratic engagement to eliminate corruption and promote social justice as outlined in the Qu'ran, especially by giving charity to the poor. Hasim became the forerunner of today's Islamist parties.

Foreign influences also boosted Salafi networks, which nurtured the growth of Islamists' political base. In the 1980s and 1990s, Salafi activists, some of whom received funding or training from Saudi Arabia or other Arab Gulf states, preached in poor urban areas and distributed sermons on cassettes. The boom of international Islamic

NGOs in Mauritania in the 1980s,¹ along with increased activism by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and other foreign groups, aided Salafis' efforts. In general, Gulf Arab money and manpower have contributed to the increasing visibility of Islam in Mauritanian society, evident in the construction of hundreds of mosques and the founding of dozens of Islamic schools for children and adults. These developments created religious spaces that lie outside of state control and empowered new scholars, trained in Mauritania or abroad, to promote Salafism as a blueprint for social reform. The growth of Salafism has in turn fed the growth of Islamism as a political ideology, as Islamist activists seek to apply Salafi ideals to the state.

Mauritania's complex racial politics have also affected the terrain in which Islamists operate. Mauritania has three main racial groups: the *bidan* or "white Moors," who speak Arabic; the *haratin* or "black Moors," who also speak Arabic; and non-Arabic-speaking black populations, including ethnicities like the Wolof and the Soninke. White Moors, descendants of slave-owning groups, have long sat atop the political and social hierarchy in Mauritania, and slavery of non-whites has persisted to the present despite repeated laws banning the practice.

Since the late 1970s, non-white Mauritians have become increasingly vocal in fighting slavery and demanding a share of political power. Islamist

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leaders and activists have primarily been white Moors. Yet as the *haratin* in particular become more influential and take on leadership roles not only in politics but also as imams and Muslim scholars, Islamists, who appear to be interested in using Islam as a platform for pan-racial political mobilization, may be able to tap into new constituencies.

Geopolitical Pressures on Mauritania Inadvertently Strengthened Islamism

Beginning in the 1980s, changes in Mauritania's political relations with the outside world damaged the state's popularity and supplied Islamists with rhetorical ammunition to use against the government. Economic liberalization, pushed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, increased social inequality, which in turn made some groups, particularly unemployed youth, sympathetic to declarations that Islamization would solve the country's problems. In the early 1990s, Mauritania's poor human rights record and support for Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War added international isolation to its list of problems. The government made dramatic policy changes to win back U.S. aid and international support. Ironically, these changes boosted the popularity of the Islamist movement.

First, President Ould Taya launched a multiparty system in 1991. In Mauritania's first multiparty municipal elections in 1994, the ruling party swept 172 of 208 districts, but the main opposition party, which included Islamist candidates, took 17 districts. Following the elections, the government cracked down on journalists, opposition figures, and Islamists, apparently out of a desire to reaffirm control. Authorities arrested dozens of Islamists, banned several Islamist groups, and forbade political preaching. This crackdown did not slow the growth of Islamism, but it did fragment its leadership, prompting some activists to flee to the Gulf and others to reconcile with the state and accept government posts. As an older generation of Islamists retired, new leaders emerged, such as Jamil Mansour, the leading Islamist politician in Mauritania today, and Mokhtar el Hacen Ould Dedew, the country's leading Salafi preacher.

Second, Mauritania recognized Israel in 1999, in response to U.S. pressure. This decision proved deeply unpopular at home. Many Mauriticians, increasingly connected to the wider Arab world through Al Jazeera and the Internet, continue to sympathize with the Palestinian cause. The widespread anger over the government's perceived capitulation to the West gave Islamists a political opening. In the religious domain, Dedew issued a *fatwa* (Islamic edict) against relations with Israel

Islamists effectively positioned themselves as defenders of both Mauritians and Palestinians against the machinations of corrupt local elites and powerful foreign actors.

that circulated widely and gained substantial support. In the political domain, Mansour formed Ribat (“League”), an organization that contests Mauritania’s relations with Israel. Ribat and other Islamist groups organized a series of mass demonstrations against Israel in the early 2000s that further raised the profile of the Islamist movement. Framing the issue as an Arab and Islamic cause, Islamists effectively positioned themselves as defenders of both Mauritians and Palestinians against the machinations of corrupt local elites and powerful foreign actors.

Third, following the attacks of September 11, 2001, Mauritanian leaders began participating in U.S.-led counterterrorism efforts like the Pan Sahel Initiative and its successor program, the Trans Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership. Islamists agree with the objective of fighting terrorism, but they have insisted that Mauritania and its allies can solve their problems without help from Washington or Paris. At a forum on extremism held in Nouakchott in October 2010, Mansour implied that French involvement in strikes against AQIM might lead to a form of neocolonialism. He advocated regional cooperation as an alternative. Such denunciations of Western involvement in Mauritanian security affairs offer another avenue for Islamists to position themselves as champions of national autonomy.

Profiles of Islamist Leaders

All these factors contributed to the growth of a broad and extremely diverse Islamist movement whose leadership includes educated intellectuals, experienced politicians, and veteran activists. Five figures, in particular, are emblematic of different aspects of the Islamist movement: Mansour; Dedew; Mohamed Ghoulam Ould El Haj, a respected figure and a link between Tewassoul and international Islamist activism; Dr. Yaye Ndaw Coulibaly, a well-known woman and non-Arab within Tewassoul; and Outhmane Ould Abi El Maali, leader of the Fadila (“Virtue”) party.

Jamil Mansour (born 1967) currently serves as president of the National Rally for Reform and Development, or Tewassoul, and as a member of parliament. He attended ISERI, as well as Mohamed Ben Abdellah University in Fes, Morocco. He was a student leader in the 1980s and a member of the Islamist opposition in the 1990s. From 2001 to his ouster in the crackdown of 2003, he served as mayor of Arafat, an impoverished neighborhood in Nouakchott. After weathering repression from 2003 to 2005, Mansour concentrated on building Tewassoul and speaking out on international issues.

In the National Assembly, Mansour serves on the Committee for Foreign Relations. He cultivates an aura of moderation and personal righteousness. When he ran for president in 2009, his website called him a “promoter of

centrist Islamic thought” and “a symbol of uprightness and honesty.”² Mansour’s regional base (he was born in Beila, in the Trarza region in south central Mauritania) provides many of Tewassoul’s supporters.

Mokhtar el Hacem Ould Dedew (born 1963) is the spiritual patron of Tewassoul. Dedew embodies the complex and sometimes ambivalent relationship between Salafism and Islamism: He is a public figure committed to religious reform but not a politician; he focuses more on preaching than on building a political movement. Dedew received Islamic training from scholars in his family and then attended ISERI. He has spent significant time in Saudi Arabia, where he worked as an imam in Riyadh and obtained a Master of Arts degree at Muhammad Ibn Sa’ud University. He has published works on Sharia and pilgrimage, and is particularly known for his mastery of hadith (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad).

Dedew has taken leadership roles in several Islamic organizations in Nouakchott, such as the Center for Training Islamic Scholars, and he enjoys a large following among youth. His ties to Saudi Arabia and his exposure in Arab media have given him a global reputation that in turn enhances his status in Mauritania. One episode will help demonstrate his stature. In early 2010, Dedew helped mediate the release of several Mauritanian businessmen whom the government had detained on corruption charges. The government reportedly sought Dedew’s intervention on the advice of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. That al-Bashir had heard of him and saw fit to recommend him is evidence of Dedew’s international prestige. Dedew has also led government-sponsored dialogues with imprisoned jihadists.

Mohamed Ghoulam Ould El Haj Cheikh (likely in his 40s or 50s) is vice president of Tewassoul and secretary-general of Ribat. He has played a leading role in Islamist anti-Israel activities. He was a prominent passenger on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, which was boarded by the Israeli navy in May 2010, and his return to Mauritania was marked by an Islamist anti-Israel rally in Nouakchott. He acts as one of the party’s faces for international media and outreach to foreign countries, appearing frequently on networks like Al Jazeera and leading delegations to countries like Algeria.

Dr. Yaye Ndaw Coulibaly (age unknown) is one of the most prominent female politicians in Tewassoul (women play a significant role in the organization and public persona of the party). She was mayor of the Tévragh Zeina district of Nouakchott from 2007 until political opponents forced her out in April 2008. Coulibaly served as president of the Campagne des Femmes (Women’s Campaign) for Mansour’s 2009 presidential campaign. Her party leadership role helped Tewassoul present itself as a vehicle for political and social progress for women in an Islamic framework. Coulibaly, an ethnic Soninke, is also

a prominent non-Arab representative of a party whose leaders, including the other figures profiled in this section, are primarily white Moors. She currently serves in the Senate.

Outhmane Ould Ebi El Maali (born 1948) is head of the Fadila party. From a family of Islamic scholars and educated at ISERI, he has had a decades-long career in diplomacy and politics. Between 1979 and 1992, he served as consul general in Libya, Niger, and Saudi Arabia before becoming ambassador to Qatar and later Kuwait. He ran as an independent in the 2006 parliamentary elections and the 2007 presidential elections, losing in the former and scoring less than 2 percent of the vote in the latter. Fadila, legalized in 2007 along with Tewassoul, is seen as basically powerless.

Ebi El Maali's importance lies in his connections to North Africa, Egypt, and the Arab Gulf. For example, the world-famous Egyptian theologian Yusuf al-Qaradawi paid a visit to Ebi El Maali (accompanied by Dedew) during a trip to Mauritania in 2010. Ebi El Maali has also served as president of "La coordination de l'action nationaliste et islamique" (Coordinating Group for Nationalist and Islamic Action), a group of small parties and organizations that speak out on politics and Islamic affairs.

These figures exemplify several trends among the country's Islamist leaders: they tend to have university education, strong ties to foreign countries, and a keen sense of political symbolism. They are comfortable using mass media, and they reject the use of violence in the service of Islamic values. Yet the leadership class is not entirely homogeneous. Women and non-Arabs have attained prominence within the Islamist movement, and prominent leaders have pursued different forms of political activism, as indicated by the difference between Mansour's focus on electoral success and Dedew's career in preaching and mediation.

The Tewassoul Party: Years of Underground Organizing Taught Islamists Political Sophistication

The most important Islamist organization in Mauritania today is Tewassoul, a large, legally recognized, and openly Islamist party associated with the Mauritanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The formation of Tewassoul testifies to the political skills Islamist leaders acquired during their time underground and honed as independent candidates in parliamentary elections and supporters of opposition candidates in the 2003 and 2007 presidential elections.

Tewassoul is not the only Islamist party in Mauritania. In addition to the already mentioned Fadila, there are other small parties, previously sympathetic

to the late Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, which espouse some Islamist values. But since 2007, Tewassoul's modest electoral gains and its ability to win media attention and drive the political conversation have made it the most important Islamist group in the country and a player in Mauritanian politics.

Tewassoul's legal recognition in 2007 followed a period of turbulence during which the government severely repressed Islamists. As popular discontent increased in the early 2000s, President Ould Taya cracked down on Islamists but won only Pyrrhic victories against them. Arresting Islamist leaders only raised their domestic and international profiles, evoking sympathy demonstrations and strikes in Nouakchott and elsewhere.

After a coup toppled Ould Taya in 2005, the military sponsored a transition to civilian rule. During this transition, the junta banned Islamist parties from running in the 2006 local and parliamentary elections, but five Islamists running as independents were elected as representatives and two as senators, and Islamists won several mayoral elections. Islamists did not run a major candidate in the 2007 presidential elections, but when the two main candidates largely avoided discussing the Israel issue, Islamists jumped into the breach, allowing them to maintain a high political profile in the media and in the streets.

Following the elections, civilian President Sidi Mohamed Abdellahi's government legalized Tewassoul. Islamists participated in national government for the first time, joining the cabinet in May 2008. Habib Ould Hemdeit, one of Tewassoul's founders, headed the Ministry of Employment, Access, and Professional Formation, and Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Sidi, a former professor and one of Tewassoul's publicists, led the Ministry of Higher Education. This cabinet lasted less than three months, however. When parliament threatened a no confidence vote, partly to protest Abdellahi's inclusion of Islamists, the cabinet was dissolved and replaced with one comprised solely of members of the president's party.

In August 2008, as confidence in Abdellahi collapsed, General Mohamed Abdel Aziz led a new coup d'état. Tewassoul objected strongly, joining a multiparty coalition that demanded the restoration of democracy. This commitment to democracy was to some extent self-serving, in that Islamists believed they would fare better under civilian governance, but many Islamists genuinely objected to the overthrow of Mauritania's fragile democracy. During the period of greatest uncertainty, mainstream Islamists did not, notably, demand the imposition of an Islamic state, but only the restoration of civilian democratic rule.

After the coup, Tewassoul struggled to adjust to the new political landscape. The party's survival depended on the regime's toleration, but Tewassoul also had to compete with the regime rhetorically in order to remain politically relevant. In early 2009, Abdel Aziz undercut the party's relevance by adopting

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some of its anti-Israel and anticorruption rhetoric and, ultimately, recalling Mauritania's ambassador from Israel.

The party is making some headway. Tewassoul attempted to distinguish itself by conducting its first official presidential campaign, nominating Mansour for the July 2009 elections. Abdel Aziz won with 52.5 percent of the vote, and was followed by major opposition leaders like racial justice activist Messaoud Boulkheir (16 percent), and opposition veteran Ahmed Daddah (14 percent). Yet Islamists outperformed the other minor parties and candidates, including former military ruler Colonel Ely Vall. Mansour placed fourth out of ten total candidates, earning nearly 37,000 votes (5 percent). Even if the official results were rigged, as some have alleged, the elections elevated Mansour's political status and increased Tewassoul's public profile.

As Abdel Aziz consolidated power after the elections, Tewassoul's leaders decided that working with the president would enhance their political survival, and so joined the ruling coalition in November 2009. This shows that Tewassoul's leaders are pragmatists: Islamist ideology has not prevented Tewassoul from sometimes acting like other Mauritanian opposition parties, moving between pro- and anti-regime stances depending on the political imperatives of the moment. Tewassoul's major political initiatives since 2010 have included continued anti-Israel activism (such as participation in the Gaza Flotilla), support for increasing the use of Arabic in higher education, and cautious, unofficial participation in youth protests against Abdel Aziz.

With Abdel Aziz's popularity declining and protests spreading throughout the Arab world in 2011, Tewassoul resumed an anti-regime stance. In June 2011, Tewassoul joined a group of opposition parties calling for national dialogue on issues like security sector reform and media freedom. This call partly aimed to capitalize on the country's youth ferment. Mansour stepped up his

attacks on the regime, decrying its alleged corruption, the mismanagement of a national census, and other issues.

Tewassoul remains a potential partner for the president, particularly if Abdel Aziz decides that he needs its connections to the Gulf and North Africa. Yet the government has not stopped imprisoning Islamists, and dozens remain

incarcerated today—both activists and suspected terrorists. Moreover, some Tewassoul supporters were disillusioned when the party failed to make headway on Israel and other policy objectives. Islamists remain vulnerable despite their political successes.

In terms of party structure, Tewassoul is a sophisticated organization that boasts a youth wing and a women's group. The party holds five of the National Assembly's 81 seats and two of the Senate's 56, but it enjoys disproportionate strength due to its supporters' intense commitment and the leadership's skillful use of mass media. It maintains a frequently updated and well-organized

Islamists remain vulnerable despite their political successes.

website, www.tewassoul.org, available in both Arabic and French, and has a Facebook profile, a YouTube channel, and a Twitter account. The party organizes many press conferences and rallies, and its leaders appear regularly in pan-Arab media, especially Al Jazeera, as well as in the local press. Ideologically, the party continues to emphasize its commitment to Islamic values and political moderation, though at times Islam appears to be a set of guiding values rather than a set of specific policy prescriptions.

The party's social base remains primarily urban, middle class, and young. Tewassoul draws many female supporters, and in some ways the party functions as a social movement in which young people can meet potential spouses and deepen their piety. Most members are white Moors, though the party enjoys some support from the *haratin* and from non-Arabic-speaking black populations. The leadership includes many businessmen, augmenting the party's economic power, and though the leaders are not necessarily elites, they have been able to mobilize human and financial resources to grow the party.

Tewassoul has not yet achieved major-party status in Mauritania, and its electoral gains remain modest. But when compared with Islamists' political position in the 1990s, Tewassoul, as a legalized and well-organized political party with a sophisticated internal structure, represents a major advance. Islamists' future success will depend partly on whether they can continue to carve out their own rhetorical niche in the larger political scene and partly on whether they can reach new constituencies, particularly non-white Moors and rural populations.

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Mauritania's Islamists Have Close Ties With Other Arab Islamists

Mauritanian Islamists have cultivated close ties with other Islamist movements, especially in the Arab Gulf and Algeria, which could give the movement a higher profile in Arab media and attract external political and financial support for its activities in Mauritania. Tewassoul has a National Secretary for External Relations, and since the 2009 elections, it has signed an accord with a major Algerian Islamist party, the Mouvement de la société pour la paix (Movement of Society for Peace). The party's foreign connections have made it a significant broker in the Mauritanian state's external relations with the Islamic world. For example, in addition to the aforementioned connection between Dedew and Sudan's al-Bashir, Mansour was invited to a meeting between a Hezbollah delegation and Abdel Aziz in January 2011. Tewassoul has also developed strong relations with some non-Islamist parties, including the Baath Party of Syria. It considers itself part of the broader Arab political

landscape, and is interested in forming political alliances that will boost its domestic and international strength.

In the context of the “Arab Spring” and Libya’s civil war, Tewassoul became a vehicle for anti-Qaddafi sentiment among many Mauritians. In an appearance on Al Jazeera in February 2011, Dedew condemned government-sponsored violence within Libya, and Mansour tore apart Qaddafi’s Green Book in a meeting of the Mauritanian parliament. Islamists’ role in domestic opposition to Qaddafi added to the pressure on Abdel Aziz, who broke with the Libyan ruler in June 2011. More recently, Tewassoul has declared its support for anti-regime protesters in Syria.

Islamists will have small but significant influence over Mauritania’s relations with its neighbors in the new North Africa. Their ties to Algeria could mean that Libya’s weakness is Algeria’s gain, but Islamists will also likely strengthen ties with their Libyan counterparts in post-Qaddafi Libya. Political Islam’s fortunes could improve generally in the new North Africa; Mauritanian Islamists will be in a position to help shape this trend.

The Gulf remains an important destination for Mauritanian Islamists. Leaders like Mansour and Dedew have spent time in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf countries. Numerous Mauritanian preachers and activists, including well-known Salafis like Sheikh Abdullah Bin Bayyah, reside in the Gulf but return home regularly, acting as personal links to the global Islamist web. The UAE is home to several thousand Mauritians, dozens of whom work as imams, preachers, judges, and professors.

Beyond the Gulf, Mauritanian Islamists’ support for the Palestinian cause continues to shape the movement. And Tewassoul’s affiliations with the Muslim Brotherhood make it part of a loose network of Islamist parties throughout the Arab world. These links constitute pathways of political and cultural exchange but are unlikely to fuel Islamic extremism.

Jihadism Is a Radical Fringe That Mainstream Islamists Oppose

Since a June 2005 attack by militants on a military base in northern Mauritania, the Mauritanian state has steadfastly battled jihadists, with Abdel Aziz taking a particularly hard line on the issue. The 2005 attack was carried out by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, an Algerian jihadist splinter group that renamed itself Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007. AQIM operates throughout Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania, and has claimed responsibility for about a dozen kidnappings and attempted kidnappings of Westerners in recent years. AQIM has attacked symbols of Western power in Mauritania, opening fire on the Israeli embassy in 2008 and carrying out a suicide bombing near the French embassy in 2009. In early 2011, Mauritanian

soldiers intercepted an AQIM convoy carrying explosives to Nouakchott as part of an assassination plot against Abdel Aziz, a bomb plot against the French embassy, or both.

Abdel Aziz sees AQIM as the country's greatest security challenge, although some believe he has incentives to exaggerate the threat in order to increase the financial support he receives from the West. He has attempted to destroy the group's camps in Mauritania and neighboring Mali. This operation has driven militants out of some areas and has won cooperation from Mali, which has an enduring reputation as the Sahelian country least committed to armed counterterrorism.

AQIM's attacks in Mauritania form part of its broader political and criminal strategy in the Sahel. They are also a response to Mauritania's domestic political tensions over the state's geopolitical stances. The overwhelming majority of Mauritians reject AQIM's brand of Islam. But AQIM's uncompromising stances on Israel and the war in Afghanistan appeal to some Mauritanian youth, and the jihadist group's online propaganda and rural preaching tours have allowed it to recruit a number of Mauritians.

A few Mauritians have been accused of involvement with Al-Qaeda Central. One example is Mohamedou Ould Slahi, who spent time with the mujahideen in Afghanistan, reportedly aided several of the 9/11 pilots, and is currently being held in Guantanamo Bay. Some Mauritanian nationals have also joined extremist cells in Saudi Arabia. Most of the concern around jihadism in Mauritania, however, has centered on AQIM.

Moderate Islamism is distinct from jihadism, but Mauritanian regimes have sometimes conflated the two tendencies. In the past, authorities regularly accused Islamist politicians of spurring radicalization and plotting violence. The military still harbors suspicions of Islamists; the 2008 coup sprang in part from officers' perceptions that Abdellahi was weak on terrorism and too tolerant of Islamism.

Since 2008, however, Abdel Aziz has worked to co-opt the Islamist movement, partnering with Islamists like Dedew to rehabilitate jihadists. Terrorism has topped the agenda at meetings between Abdel Aziz and Mansour. The president will likely continue to seek Islamists' help in this domain.

Mainstream Islamists have stridently rejected violence in general and AQIM in particular. The existence of legalized Islamist parties and moderate Islamist and Salafi organizations has likely reduced the spread of jihadism by providing young Mauritians with nonviolent avenues for expressing a politicized Muslim identity. Denunciations of jihadism, moreover, likely carry weight among Mauritanian youth when they come from preachers and politicians whose piety is taken seriously and whose credentials as opposition figures have been demonstrated through years of activism and long stints in government prisons.

One reason for Islamists' objections to jihadism is that it directly competes with Tewassoul for recruits. For example, residents of Arafat, one of Tewassoul's strongholds in Nouakchott, have expressed fears that jihadist websites are radicalizing youth. This trend threatens to undermine Tewassoul among its own constituents and in the eyes of the government. It could pressure Tewassoul to sharpen its Islamic rhetoric while more effectively presenting a nonviolent alternative to jihadism.

Moderate Islamists' reaction to jihadism, however, involves a balancing act. Islamists face pressure to criticize jihadists without overly antagonizing their sympathizers, and to cooperate with the regime without becoming too closely associated with it.

Islamists' enthusiasm for cooperation with the state is limited by their need to retain a distinct political identity.

Islamists' enthusiasm for cooperation with the state is limited by their need to retain a distinct political identity. If Islamist politicians align too closely with the regime, they could lose their credibility as independent voices. Moderate Islamists support the fight against AQIM, but

they want to carefully manage their contribution to the effort. The complexities of this balancing act mean that Islamists will denounce terrorism on their own terms, for example by calling for a fight against jihadism but also rejecting Western support in that fight.

Conclusion

Islamism in Mauritania gives voice to the religious convictions, political frustrations, and anti-Western sentiments of a significant segment of the population. Due to their increasing role in multiparty politics in the past six years, Islamists have influenced policymaking on issues like Israel and counterterrorism. Mauritanian Islamism is also a formidable presence on the global Islamist circuit.

Islamists face several challenges, including President Abdel Aziz's success in co-opting their rhetoric, the pitfalls of preserving Islamic principles while navigating electoral politics, and the need to respond to jihadism. But the trends that gave rise to Islamism continue: urbanization proceeds, social inequality remains, and mosques and Islamic schools still proliferate, allowing Islamists to expand their influence in urban spaces and reach new audiences, particularly among the youth. Tewassoul as well as politicians like Jamil Mansour are likely to lose support if they draw too close to Abdel Aziz or if they make no progress in implementing their agenda.

Western actions in Mauritania will affect the trajectory of Islamism going forward. An increased Western military presence in the Sahel, pressure from Washington on Nouakchott to restore full relations with Israel, and negative

Western rhetoric surrounding Islamist electoral victories elsewhere in the region are all factors that could present Mauritanian Islamists with political opportunities. Islamists have often attracted popular support by casting themselves as champions of Muslims oppressed by Arab and Western governments. Islamists will likely denounce rhetoric and actions coming from Washington that they see as revealing ambitions to control and dominate Mauritania.

This does not mean that Washington and Mauritanian Islamists have no interests in common. Moderate Islamists' denunciations of jihadists should be encouraged, as should the regime's working relationship with parties like Tewassoul. Yet if relations between the regime and the Islamists deteriorate, or if Islamists are able to make campaign issues of Mauritania's war on terrorism and the regime's ties to the West, Islamists could begin to capture a larger share of the electorate and to mobilize larger protests against the regime and against foreign actors.

In this Islamic Republic, as tensions over what Islam means continue to shape political life, religious debates, and social activism, Mauritanian Islamism will remain a strong political force and an influential social movement, moderate on domestic issues and outspoken on international topics. Mauritania will continue to juggle its Islamic identity, its societal divisions, and its precarious geopolitical position.

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Notes

- 1 These NGOs include the Saudi-run International Islamic Relief Organization, the Kuwaiti-directed Africa Muslim Agency, and Sudan's International African Relief Agency.
- 2 "Biographie du symbole de la droiture et de l'honnêteté: Mohamed Jemil Ould Brahim Ould Mansour." 2009, http://jemilmansour.net/francais/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=10&Itemid=13.

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