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## Mauritania votes for president under military rule Polls close in Mauritanian presidential vote



Mauritanian voters rush to voting polls

NOUAKCHOTT (Al Arabiya, Agencies)

Polls closed Saturday in Mauritanian presidential elections nearly a year after the overthrow of the country's first elected president, with the coup leader confident of outright victory.

Polling stations began to close at 19:00 GMT, unless voters were still waiting to cast their ballots, and counting at those stations had begun, an AFP journalist witnessed. Initial results were expected on Monday.

### High voter turnout

Throughout the day Mauritians went to the polls in large numbers. In the capital Nouakchott, long lines of voters were seen queuing outside a polling station at the Olympic stadium, an AFP correspondent reported.

Some 1.2 million of the nation's three million people are eligible to vote.

Police shot and injured one man and arrested two others in an armed clash overnight in the same area of Nouakchott in which gunmen killed an American aid worker last month, a police source said. However, Saturday began peacefully.

"Police tried to enter a house and there was an exchange of fire," the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

### Polls

Their presence was particularly to be expected after a shoot-out on the eve of the election between

police and "armed men," suspected Islamists, in the Ksar district of the capital.

Voting papers carried the photos, names and symbols of the candidates with a box in which to mark their choice.

After a lackluster campaign, observers believe that no candidate is strong enough to emerge alone from the first round and that a second run-off vote is likely on Aug. 1.

### Coup leader popular

Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who formally ceded control as head of the ruling junta in April and resigned from the army in order to contest the election as the "candidate of the poor," said his election would usher in "change for a prosperous Mauritania."

But one opposition candidate, Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, who overthrew dictator Maaouiya Ould Taya in 2005 and headed a junta for two years before handing over to a civilian government, claimed there has been massive fraud.

Ould Abdel Aziz, who toppled President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in the Aug. 6, 2008 coup, is one of nine candidates running in the election designed to restore constitutional democracy to the northwestern African country.

Ould Abdel Aziz told his supporters during campaigning earlier this month that he would "put an end to the waste and all the shocks that have brought Mauritania to its knees after several decades of misrule."

The election followed an internationally-brokered deal led by Senegal to end a political crisis in a country twice the size of France.

"The right conditions are there, we're confident, we're going to have more than 300 monitors deployed across the country," said the committee chief in the International Contact Group for Mauritania, Mamahat Saleh Anif.

The ex-junta chief's biggest challengers are Ahmed Ould Daddah, head of the main opposition party, the Rally of Democratic Forces, parliamentary speaker Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, who is the candidate of the National Front for the Defense of Democracy, and Jemil Ould Mansour, leader of the Islamist party Tewassoul.

Former Prime Minister Sghaier Ould MBareck early this month announced that he was withdrawing as a candidate to support Ould Abdel Aziz, whom he called the "candidate of constructive change and serenity."

The main candidates have attempted to broaden their support base with talk of real change, economic and social progress and development in the largely arid nation on the southwestern side of the Sahara.

For the first time the election is being contested by a moderate Islamist, Ould Mansour, head of the country's only Islamist political party.

Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, who led a failed coup against Maaouiya Ould Taya in 2003, is also running.