

Monday, 20 July 2009

## Former coup leader wins more than half of votes Abdel Aziz wins Mauritania poll, rivals cry foul



Abdel Aziz has promised food, fuel price cuts and to fight terrorism

**NOUAKCHOTT (Agencies)**

General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who ousted Mauritania's first democratically elected leader in a coup last year, won the desert nation's presidential election in the first round, the government said late Sunday.

Abdel Aziz won 52.6 percent of the vote, Interior Minister Mohamed Ould Rzeizim said, hours after the main opposition candidates rejected the poll as a sham.

Rzeizim said there had been no formal complaints, removing the need for a run off, and Abdel Aziz declared himself president of all Mauritians. But the result must still be confirmed by Mauritania's Constitutional Court.

"This is a victory against poverty and ignorance ... those who say there was fraud should come forward with concrete proof," said Abdel Aziz, who also vowed to tackle terrorism in a country that has seen sporadic attacks by al-Qaeda.

[Saturday's vote](#) was the first since he toppled the Islamic state's first freely elected leader last August. It was designed to show investors and donors that the country is ready to rejoin the international fold, after sanctions were imposed to punish it for the coup.

"Firstly we firmly reject these prefabricated results, secondly we call on the international community to put in place an inquiry to shed some light on the electoral process," the challengers to Abdel Aziz said in a statement.

They also called on "competent bodies" not to validate the results, and for the Mauritanian people to "mobilize to defeat this electoral coup d'état."

Mohamed Ould Biya, a spokesman for the group, said electoral lists had been tampered with and voters had used fake ballot papers and identity cards during the poll to add to Abdel Aziz's tally. He did not provide any proof of his allegations.

### Challengers

The main opposition candidates initially planned to boycott the poll but agreed to take part after lengthy negotiations; a move which diplomats said would make the election more credible.

Neither the United Nations nor the European Union, which has cut aid because of the coup, sent election observers to Mauritania.

But more than 300 international observers from the African Union, the International Organization of French-speaking Countries (OIF) and the Arab League attended the vote.

The rivals to Abdel Aziz include Ahmed Ould Daddah, a veteran opposition figure; Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, another former coup leader; and Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, a politician who has spearheaded the challenge to last year's coup.

Messaoud and Ould Daddah were Abdel Aziz's closest challengers with 16.3 and 13.7 percent of the vote, respectively, according to the interior ministry figures.

Analysts had predicted a victory for Abdel Aziz but said the inclusion of Ould Daddah and Vall had offered voters a genuine choice and stiffened the opposition.

### Price cuts and fighting terrorism

Abdel Aziz has promised food and fuel price cuts, calculated to appeal to many Mauritians. Forty percent live below the poverty line in a nation that exports fish and iron ore but hopes to ramp up offshore oil production.

Mauritanian police clashed with suspected al-Qaeda militants in the capital on Friday, weeks after the organization claimed to have [killed a U.S. aid worker](#) there. The United States suspended counter-terrorism cooperation after the 2008 coup.

"We take this terrorist threat seriously. We need to fight terrorism in terms of security but also by improving the living conditions of the people and fighting ignorance," Abdel Aziz said.

"We will fight terrorism in all its forms... by strengthening the resources at the army's disposal," he vowed.

A free vote would set a positive example to the rest of the region, where military coups and constitutional crises have become a feature of politics in the past year.

But Abdel Aziz's rivals complained it had done the opposite.

"It seems quite clear to me that what we are seeing is a sham of an election," Messaoud said.