

Mauritania's coup is a setback for democracy

The overthrow in August of what arguably constituted the most democratic government in the Arab world marks a serious setback in Africa as well as the Middle East. There had been great expectations for Mauritania when the country had its first free elections in 2006. As one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world and, as with many other African countries, its boundaries and nationhood largely an artificial creation of European colonial powers, Mauritania fanned hopes if democracy could take hold, it could triumph anywhere.

Mauritania's elected government under President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi proved a disappointment in many ways, with widespread corruption and factional disputes with parliament. What brought down the government, however, was the all-too-familiar scourge faced by many nascent democracies: the coup d'état.

Whatever the failures of President Abdallahi's administration, history has shown that military coups against an unpopular leader, even when the generals claim the best of intentions, tend to create more problems than they solve. Furthermore, there are far more democratic means of holding leaders accountable.

Coups tend to concentrate power among a small number of individuals and therefore make it more difficult for the people to hold their government or military accountable. When military officers have taken the risk to launch a coup, they often feel entitled to exercise state power themselves. For example, in Mauritania, a puppet civilian State Council announced by the putschists never materialized, leaving no formal checks and balances available to hold the new military leadership accountable.

Furthermore, in violating international norms by taking over a government by force, coup plotters usually require the support of a foreign power, thereby compromising their country's sovereignty. In the case of Mauritania, its powerful neighbor Morocco, where coup leader Gen. Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz received his training, appears to be backing the military takeover. Such support can hardly be reassuring for Mauritania, since the US-backed Moroccan monarchy for many years claimed Mauritania as Moroccan territory and has invaded and occupied neighboring Western Sahara, on which it had made similar territorial claims.

Finally, coups set a terrible precedent for future transitions of power. As we have seen in Haiti, Thailand and a number of African countries, once coups are established as the de facto method of power transfer, they are far more likely to continue in the future. In Mauritania, the military takeover of Aug. 6 has shattered the dreams of Mauritania who wanted political change to take place through free elections, not just the force of arms.

There are better ways to hold corrupt and inept leaders accountable. If circumstances make it impossible for a population to exercise their will through free and fair elections, there is the option of massive civil resistance. In such countries as the Philippines in 1986, Bolivia in 1981, Serbia in 2000, Mali in 1991, Chile in 1988, Czechoslovakia in 1989 and Ukraine in 2004, corrupt and autocratic regimes have been brought down nonviolently without leadership from the military or external forces. In these and other cases, ordinary people, using such nonviolent methods as strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, mass demonstrations and the establishment of parallel institutions, expanded the political space available to them, fought for their rights and emerged victorious.

Such nonviolent civil resistance movements avoid not only the pitfalls of coups and foreign intervention but also provide a surer basis for sustainable democracy. Nonviolent civil resistance movements help correct the imbalance of power in a society by stimulating wide and diverse civilian participation, thereby decentralizing power away from a ruling elite and toward the people themselves.

The exercise of such "people power" can do much to break the cycle of coups and other non-democratic transfers of power that have afflicted Mauritania and other countries, and holds far greater promise for bringing about democratic and responsible government. We may even see it in Mauritania. <http://ncronline.org/node/2011>