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The Technocratic Trajectory and Political Instability of Mauritania 2003-2011

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The Technocratic Trajectory and Political Instability of Mauritania, 2003-2011
Abstract

In 2004 the government of Mauritania admitted that for the past ten years its national macroeconomic and financial data had been falsified. This admission revealed a small part of the fraudulent practices that took place during the Taya era which ended in 2005. But it also showed that the economic management of this "good student" had become ensnared in true "bureaucratic anarchy." Beginning in 2005, when the democratic transition should have enabled the public administration's house to be put in order, reforms were often motivated by a desire to improve the image of the regime and were thus less than effective. Then, following the elections of 2007, and in the midst of financial scandals, the government developed a technocratic approach which alienated the Mauritanian public who perceived a power vacuum. A new coup d'Etat occurred during the summer of 2008. The "Rectification Movement" of general Abdel Aziz acquired legitimacy as a result of its fight against terrorism in Sahel. Employing populist rhetoric and adopting the moral high ground in the fight against rampant corruption, the Movement favored lax management of resources and tight, even authoritarian, control of public finances.

Trajectoire technocratique et instabilité politique en Mauritanie, 2003-2011
Résumé

En 2004, le gouvernement mauritanien avouait que les statistiques macroéconomiques et financières nationales étaient falsifiées depuis plus de dix ans. Cet épisode levait un coin du voile sur les pratiques frauduleuses de l'ère Taya, renversé en 2005. Mais il montrait aussi que les procédures formelles de la gestion économique de ce « bon élève » s'étaient jusque-là enchevêtrées aux pratiques de captation, dans une véritable « anarchie bureaucratique ». A partir de 2005, alors que la transition démocratique devait remettre de l'ordre dans la gestion publique, les réformes, souvent motivées par l'amélioration de l'image du régime, restèrent ambivalentes. Puis, après les élections de 2007, sur fond de scandales financiers, le gouvernement a développé une orientation technocratique qui l'a éloigné des Mauritaniens et nourri le sentiment de vacuité du pouvoir. Un nouveau coup d'Etat eut lieu à l'été 2008. Le « mouvement rectificatif » du général Abdel Aziz, s'abritant derrière un discours populiste et moralisateur de lutte contre la gabegie, favorise désormais une gestion discrétionnaire des ressources et un contrôle étroit, voire autoritaire, des finances publiques, renforcé par la rente de légitimation que lui fournit la lutte contre le terrorisme au Sahel.

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In the summer of 2003 an attempted coup d'Etat by a group of Arab nationalist soldiers (the "Knights of Change") seriously undermined the regime of Maaouya Ould Taya, who had been in power in Mauritania for 20 years, and marked the start of a long period of political instability. In August 2005 President Taya was overthrown by his own colonels, whose leader, Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, took over as head of a military council for justice and democracy (CMJD) and raised many hopes with a policy of transition to democracy. However this "transition" did not bring social and political calm to Mauritania. The elections of spring 2007 saw the arrival in power of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, soon to be criticized for his chaotic entourage and independence from the army. A further coup d'Etat took place in the summer of 2008, instigated by General Ould Abdel Aziz, who had been behind the previous coup of 2005 and had led the president's battalion. General Ould Abdel Aziz's populist language and social rhetoric brought him success at the ballot box in 2009, and his skilful conduct of dialogue with the opposition, known as the "Dakar process," also gave him legitimacy in the eyes of external partners.[1] Nevertheless, the social and political climate has since continued to deteriorate, with President Aziz being accused of a concentration of power and criticized for his management practices.

In order to look at the trajectories of the state during this period, the present study will analyze its practices of economic management. The management of public administration is central to an understanding of Mauritania's political trajectory; but, while the misappropriation and corrupt practices of different governments are often foregrounded, the concrete procedures used in administrative management and the work of technocrats remain little studied. It is true that the Mauritanian administration displays massive informality. However, even when they are circumvented, rules provide a basis for ways of governing. In focusing on the "concrete aspect

[1] A. Antil, "Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz l'alchimiste," *L'Année du Maghreb*, VI, 2010.

of the state" in its work of steering the economy, the present study thus seeks to analyze modes of government through bureaucratic techniques and the economic management procedures they employ.[2]

To this end, our study falls into three parts:

The first part focuses mainly on the end of the Taya era and considers the role of procedures for the management of economic policy within a situation of massive informality, paying particular attention to the paradox in which the state "governed the economy on the basis of false figures" throughout the first half of the 2000s. We shall pose the question of how technocratic procedures structured modes of government.

The second part of the study will consider paradoxes relating to role of technocratic skills in modes of government in Mauritania, revealing the possibility of a mix of modernizing repertoires and predation, notably through markets in expertise. The period from democratic transition to the 2008 coup d'Etat will be considered in the light of the paradoxical role played by technocratic approaches.

The third part of the study will take technocratic practices as a starting point for a consideration of the current situation in Mauritania, seeking to identify elements that indicate recent transformations in modes of government.

Dynamics of state informalization and economic management procedures

Using Formal Procedures to Analyze Power

How should we describe the role of the rules and formal procedures governing economic management in Mauritania? In the period 2004–2006, not only did the government admit to faking its economic statistics over some 15 years, notably in order to meet the conditions set by the IMF, it also announced that it had "steered" the economy on the basis of false figures, since the government, with the "help" of the international organizations, had defined and implemented economic policies based on this statistical fiction. So, in the *Report on The Revision of Economic Data 1992-2004*, published in June 2006, the Mauritanian government stated that during that period "macroeconomic management became increasingly inappropriate to the real situation, often with the advice of partners who had been misled, leading to the taking of measures that fostered imbalances instead of combating them."[3] While the government

[2] See P. Lascoumes and P. Le Galès, "L'action publique saisie par ses instruments," in P. Lascoumes, P. Le Galès (eds), *Gouverner par les instruments*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2004.

[3] Islamic Republic of Mauritania, *Rapport sur la révision des données macroéconomiques 1992-2004*, Nouakchott, June 2006.

admitted to having massively violated certain rules, notably in relation to the rigor with which calculation methods were used, it presented its management of economic policy as a structured process, consisting of "measures" formulated on the basis of diagnoses backed up by figures, even if those figures had been actively falsified. By implication, the government was asserting that formal procedures did exist, even if their transgression was rife. Beyond this, all successive regimes in Mauritania since 2003 have been characterized by predatory practices, while calling for the implementation of reforms and a "moralization of public life." The corresponding reforms have never been neutral for either the conduct of public life or the legitimation strategies of the different regimes. Repertoires of transgression and circumvention have thus cohabited closely with those of legalism and technocratic modernization.

It matters little to us here to know whether or not the rules were respected. Instead, we shall adopt a political economist approach in seeking to understand how they operate, be it through respect or transgression, and lead to ways of governing. When Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem describes how circumvention is one of the values guiding economic behavior in Mauritania, he reminds us that rules exist and operate, in being circumvented.[4] In his view it is impossible to understand how the port of Nouakchott functions without analyzing the way that customs legislation is circumvented and generates income for intermediaries,[5] just as democracy can function as an illusion, despite the systematic rigging of elections.[6] Similarly, Mohamed Fall Ould Bah and Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh have shown how Mauritanian society seized on bank credit to establish a debt-based economy in contradiction with the rules of prudence, but nevertheless underpinning social relations of dependency, with the banking sector becoming one of the major sites of domination in Mauritania.[7] These examples indicate that economic practices and modes of domination in Mauritania do not exist separately from formal procedures and rules, but are integrated with them in a plurality of social and political relationships. This observation provides the basis for the present study, which seeks to describe the way economic policies are conducted, somewhere between formal procedures and the multiplicity of other social practices in which it has a role.

[4] Z. Ould Ahmed Salem, "'Tcheb-tchib' et compagnie. Lexique de la survie et figures de la réussite en Mauritanie," *Politique africaine*, no. 82, June 2001.

[5] See Z. Ould Ahmed Salem, *Fraude et piratage halieutique en Mauritanie*, study for the French Ministry of Defence and CERI-Sciences Po, Paris, 1999.

[6] See Z. Ould Ahmed Salem, "La démocratisation en Mauritanie: une 'illusion' postcoloniale?," *Politique africaine*, no. 75, October 1999.

[7] See M. Fall Ould Bah and A. Wedoud Ould Cheikh, "Entrepreneurs moraux et réseaux financiers islamiques en Mauritanie," *Afrique contemporaine*, 231 (3), 2009.

• Informal administration

Bureaucratic activities and state management in Mauritania have long operated in a context of massive informality and fraud. Macroeconomic policies offer a striking example of this: the scale of the circumvention reflected in the falsification of public accounts in the period 2000-2005 undermines the very principle of a state budget and, still more, the relevance of budgetary statistics and mechanisms for steering the economy.

Extra-budgetary expenditure reached 40 % of the budget in 2003, representing almost 12 % of official GDP at that time.[8] In 2004, three distinct budgetary exercises were carried out simultaneously, with none of the three accounts ever being closed, making it impossible to audit or monitor expenditure in any reliable way.[9] An analysis of this type of situation forces us to leave normative concepts aside, notably in dealing with institutional logics. Indeed the administrative situation is often an illusion. A perfect illustration of the gap between legal procedures and informal arrangements is offered by the debt created without the Treasury's knowledge and which, after years of fraud, the Treasury had to repay.

Charts and diagrams are often meaningless. Up to 2005 the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Development (MAED) owed much of its prestige not to its role as "coordinator of social and economic policies" but to the management of many projects for which it was given direct responsibility in a largely discretionary manner. One of these projects involved the richly funded unit in charge of education reform, which was placed under the authority of the MAED, thereby escaping that of the Ministry of Education. Meanwhile many institutions collecting receipts became sites of major powers since, contrary to the regulations, most did not pass on these "public receipts" to the Treasury. A typical case is that of the Ministry of Fisheries, which collected fines and payments while running the trade in licences. Conversely, the upper ranks of the police depended largely on funding from "outside" the state, and more precisely on the national transport Federation, which was in the hands of businessmen from the President's tribe, who had a monopoly in the sector at the time.[10] More generally, as in many countries coming out of adjustment, but in a particularly evident way, the proliferation of agencies, commissions, semi-public businesses and major projects made the public sector appear highly fragmented into a great many coveted centers of power and, to some extent, comprising a set of obscurely structured "fiefs." The bureaucratic work of the public administration was thus underpinned by a situation in which institutional functions were often dominated by power relations and access to resources.

[8] Islamic Republic of Mauritania, *Rapport sur la révision des données...*, op. cit.

[9] See International Monetary Fund, *Islamic Republic of Mauritania. Report on Non-Complying Disbursement*, Washington DC, 2005, p. 16.

[10] The monopoly was finally dismantled in 2006 under very strong pressure from the European Commission, which regarded it as a hindrance to transport development.

• A "model pupil" caught between evasion and authoritarian practices

Several elements can help to explain the causes and consequences of this situation. In 2003 Mauritania had spent a great many years as the "model pupil" of international organizations and adjustment. International institutions regarded the country as having accomplished "an impressive array of structural and macroeconomic reforms.[11]" Mauritania was allowed to participate in all the pilot schemes, for example drawing up one of the first strategic frameworks in the fight against poverty in Africa and being a very early beneficiary of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries' (HIPC) initiative. However, Mauritania played the card of democratization and docile acceptance of adjustment only after a particularly traumatic period in the 1980s, marked by the ethnic violence of 1989 that was a legacy of the difficult birth of a young "frontier state," prey to many centrifugal forces.[12] In the early 1980s the Mauritanian regime took refuge in stabilization through a tribal equation,[13] straddling deep socio-political rifts, and used authoritarian and clientelist practices to maintain a fragile calm in the 1990s.[14] In particular it set itself apart in order to ensure a flow of income from outside, which was necessary both for security and to supply government clients. In 1999 Mauritania established diplomatic relations with Israel, despite an intense opposition from its citizens, in order to retain the goodwill of the United States and international organizations. In 2003, Mauritania was managing the tension inherited from the Taya years by harvesting the fruits of its "model pupil" status and keeping up the appearances of reform.

While there is nothing new about a situation in which aid goes hand in hand with authoritarian and clientelist domination (we can think of Tunisia as described by Béatrice Hibou[15]), the way these different aspects combined in Mauritania is far from anecdotal interest. The "model pupil" status and bureaucratic practices behind the "reformist façade" were in reality located at the intersection of many crucial repertoires of action, involving deceit and authoritarian practices. So when, in 2004, it was discovered that public sector data had been widely instrumentalized, silence reigned. In Nouakchott, a city of salons where information always gets out in rumours and the society is aware of what the authorities and business get up to, behavior is regulated by taboo and powerful prohibitions. In the beginning of the years 2000, the regime's chosen weapons were silence and weasel words[16]: denunciations of slavery were systematically criminalized; mention of the humanitarian deficit was taboo; censorship of the press was

[11] A description to be found in, for example, IMF, *Staff Report for the 2003 Article IV Consultation, and Request for a Three-Year Arrangement Under the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility,* IMF Country Report no. 03/314, June 2003.

[12] See Z. Ould Ahmed Salem, "Les marges d'un Etat-frontière. Histoire régionale, clôture nationale et enjeux locaux," in Z. Ould Ahmed Salem (ed.), *Les Trajectoires d'un Etat-frontière. Espace, évolutions politiques et transformations sociales en Mauritanie*, Dakar, Codesria, 2004, pp. 9-45.

[13] See P. Marchesin, *Tribus, ethnies et pouvoirs en Mauritanie*, Paris, Karthala, 1992.

[14] See, for example, B. N'diaye, "Mauritania, August 2005: Justice and Democracy, or Just Another Coup?," *African Affairs*, 105 (420), 2006.

[15] B. Hibou, *La Force de l'obéissance. Economie politique de la répression en Tunisie*, Paris, La Découverte, 2006.

[16] See B. N'diaye, "Mauritania, August 2005," art. cit.

frequent, by virtue of a law of 1991[17] that was not abolished until the democratic transition of 2006. The apparatus of repression was omnipresent, with social and political life regulated by "information bulletins." The same could also be seen in economic management practices, which preserved an appearance of normality, but permitted all kinds of circumvention. For example, the simple mention of a parallel exchange market in a newspaper would be censored, although this market was massive and functioned openly, and the IMF had no more permission to mention it than the newspapers. Similarly, since the retail price index was falsified, discussion of inflation was taboo. The most ordinary economic practices provided occasions for both circumvention and authoritarian practices.

Furthermore, while infringements were widespread until the end of the Taya era, the rules were more or less formally preserved. They acted as tools of power and oppression.

• A race for rents and misappropriation

The sharing out of "rents" was central to the economy of misappropriation established in the years 2000. In the forefront was the prospect of the arrival of oil, officially announced by Taya on November 28, 2002, representing a doubling of the state budget by 2010. Although hopes of an oil boom were afterwards largely disappointed, their effects on the economy were massive, notably through highly optimistic forecasts that made the national market "attractive." They generated a great deal of national and international investments (in construction, infrastructure and services for example) and an accompanying housing boom. The prospect of oil was rendered official in a context already heavily characterized by the management of rents. In 2003 resources from the fishing accords signed with the European Union already provided a quarter of the annual state budget, with another quarter provided by development aid. The scale of the aid economy is reflected in certain gigantic projects planned during this period, such as the Aftout Es-Saheli project to supply Nouakchott with water from the Senegal River, at an estimated cost of some 300 million dollars, in other words the equivalent of total public expenditure for one year (it ultimately cost 450 million dollars and work did not start until 2007), glittering with a myriad of state contracts. Moreover the lowest estimates already put public expenditure at over 35 % of official GDP, which was much more than other countries in the zone, with public contracts being a major driver of activity. On the other hand, the effects of this explosion in rents were complex and ambivalent. For example, the effect of the fishing accords between Mauritania and the European Union was to increase the trade in licences and increase over-fishing, eroding the sector's profitability.[18] In addition, the fight for resources was exacerbated by very harsh economic conditions—a spectacular rise in prices, particularly in the years 2002-2006 (over 40 % for food products between 2003 and 2006)—and by the insecurity of much of the funding, which further increased economic instability. While there was abundant development aid, the diplomatic position of Mauritania remained unstable and

[17] Legal order of July 25, 1991 on freedom of the press, notably article 11.

[18] See Z. Ould Ahmed Salem, "Le partenariat Union Européenne-Afrique dans l'impasse? Le cas des accords de pêche," *ASC Working Paper*, 78/2008, Leiden.

the country passed through periodic crises with international partners. Moreover political events created very uneven economic rhythms, linked to the management of expenditure. So in the second half of 2003, during a wave of inflation, public expenditure was frozen for almost six months between the attempted coup d'Etat and the presidential elections. From June no bills were paid. Only the electoral campaign late in the year made it possible to get money out of the state coffers. Yet at that time the "conjuncture" was governed by public contracts, which determined whether or not money circulated. This is understandable since one adjustment variable in the management of public funds was a very high level of domestic debt, often translated into long delays in paying suppliers. Public money was providential, while the state, to use the expression of Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, could be compared to a "boutique structure.[19]"

So Mauritania was subject to a great deal of informality linked to a rush to appropriate rents. This obviously had multiple consequences for economic management, as attested by the mechanisms for falsifying data that we shall describe below. Investigating these allows us to analyze the way that power was exerted in this situation of informality.

Accommodations Between Informal Interactions and Technical Procedures: The Falsification of Economic and Financial Statistics

• Mechanisms for the creation of economic fiction under Taya

By 2003 the falsification of the macroeconomic accounts had reached an impressive scale: as shown by the re-evaluation undertaken in 2005 and 2006, the sum involved was twice as big as that shown in the official statistics. The currency reserves, officially representing 12 months of imports, in fact covered two weeks. The figures had been falsified since 1992, and on a grand scale since 1995.[20] They masked illegal uses of public money, the provision of funds to private individuals and fraudulent access to the currency reserves. Several types of mechanism were used: so-called extra-budgetary expenditure, in other words public expenditure carried out by the Treasury but without legal authorization; the anarchic opening of credit facilities with the central bank; the abusive distribution of funds to private individuals; debits to the Treasury's accounts at the Central Bank without the knowledge of the Ministry of Finance; privileged access to the exchange market for some individuals, and so on. There were many reasons for all this. From 1995 many of these sums initially corresponded to military expenditure ordered by the President of the Republic.[21] In addition, some major public programs operated off-budget, such as the emergency food programs of 2003 and 2004. Lastly, as discovered

[19] See A. Wedoud Ould Cheikh, "Les habits neufs du sultan: sur le pouvoir et ses (res)sources en Mauritanie", *Maghreb-Machrek*, no. 189, 2006.

[20] See Islamic Republic of Mauritania, *Rapport sur la révision des données…*, op. cit.

[21] Conversation with a former Central Bank official, Nouakchott, July 2011.

later, particularly lucrative operations were carried out behind the back of the central bank for the profit of individuals. For example, credit facilities were made available to primary banks without justification in 2001 and 2002, as was widely publicized when some of the country's most important businessmen belonging to the tribe of the former president were sent to prison in 2009.[22]

However, the management of financial and economic policies also involved formal procedures. The IMF teams notably played a crucial part in the process of constructing the economic fiction. Their interventions provided the underlying procedures on the basis of which policies were developed and to which administrative activity was linked. As a recipient of IMF loans until 2005, Mauritania was also subject to the constant "monitoring" of its policies and statistical indicators by the organization. IMF teams regularly went to Nouakchott for this purpose—three or four times a year at least. They worked closely with the Mauritanian authorities, providing very concrete support to the development of economic policies: they discussed the consistency of the figures, the techniques used to produce them, how they should be interpreted, the technical hypotheses on which they were based, and so on. Ultimately the IMF teams actually validated the economic policies and statistical data, on which access to funds was based.[23] So we can say that the statistical fiction that remained in place for over 15 years really was built up before their eyes.

On the other hand government departments talked to each other very little in the years 2000. The withholding of information was at its height at the end of the Taya era. During this period interministerial cooperation, and even that between divisions and departments within a single institution, was completely blocked by the impossibility of gaining access to the other side's information, which was totally inconsistent and, therefore, kept highly secret. For example, just as within the national office of statistics (ONS) it was extremely difficult to obtain information from the customs service in order to carry out a national audit, so it was sometimes very difficult, within the ONS itself, to gather detailed figures in relation to prices, although these were produced by another department in the same building. But because prices were subject to manipulation, more and more obstacles were erected to prevent the circulation of the figures. Meanwhile, a bureaucratic coping system was simultaneously established to get round the barriers: so, when officials from the MAED were granted the privilege of obtaining data that ONS departments could not get hold of—such as information on fishing and customs—they would pass them on to their colleagues and vice-versa. Many administrative relationships were contingent on the small details of everyday office life, interpersonal relationships, friendships, and even tribal relationships. The same was true, in more exacerbated form, when it came to defining "economic policy": for example the budgetary forecasts prepared by the Ministry of Finances were transmitted to other ministries only with difficulty, including to those colleagues who were theoretically closest, such as those at the Ministry of Economy. In such an opaque context the giving of any "undertaking" in the form of official government announcements of

[22] See, for example, *Le Quotidien de Nouakchott*, "Scandale de la Banque centrale de Mauritanie (BCM): pourquoi Ould Nagi a-t-il été arrêté?," article by Bouna Cherif, November 17, 2009, consulted on the newspaper's website.

[23] For an analysis of the IMF's methods from a social science perspective, see R. Harper, *Inside the IMF: an Ethnography of Documents, Technology, and Organizational Action*, Orlando, Academic Press, 1997.

planned state expenditure for the following year was a very delicate matter. So administrative compartmentalization and opacity reigned against a background of false accounting.

On the other hand, the IMF and its procedures played a real part in coordinating the Mauritanian institutional architecture. For the data were of course passed on to the IMF teams (as an IMF member Mauritania was under statutory obligation to do so), who thus created centralized sets of figures that no national institution could have put together. The procedures by which macroeconomic policies were formulated thus radiated out from around the IMF teams. The teams' power to force administrations to provide them with information, falsified or not, meant that they alone were able to produce an overall view of the economy and put together all the pieces of the puzzle.[24] In practice this meant that procedures for formulating economic and financial policy existed, but were not centralized within the government. This is a crucial observation: it signifies that fiction and lies were not sufficiently managed or coordinated to be really "consistent." Rather than being a carefully planned and fully controlled construction, the lie was based on an "anarchy" of bureaucratic procedures,[25] while the formalization process was broadly coordinated, more or less unknowingly, by the IMF itself. Moreover the latter proceeded on the basis of trust and carried out proper audits only as an exception.

The lack of management was reinforced by the fact that the misuse of resources was a haphazard affair. To borrow the words of a former high-ranking official, for a long time credit facilities at the Central Bank were opened illegally, all those who were in a position to do so "helped themselves from the till." When the new governor, Zeine Ould Zeidane, arrived in July 2004, 95 % of open accounts were not legitimate. Moreover where the budget was concerned, the mechanisms seem equally haphazard: major emergency programs conducted on an entirely extra-budgetary basis and run from high up in the administration (for example at the time of the droughts of 2003, or the anti-locust campaigns of 2004) coexisted with the processing of everyday expenses, which managers would unofficially send to the Budget office because it was simpler and more flexible to do so. Accelerated and extra-budgetary procedures would be used to acquire a ream of paper or for the reception of an important guest. Indeed it was possible to incur expenses for exceptional procedures ("automatic debit letter" or "request for immediate payment") and thereby to circumvent the entire monitoring system. The Central Bank and state resources were like a till from which all who could do so helped themselves.

The Mauritanian government's administrative mechanisms are themselves revealed. Lies arose when a multiform and largely unrecorded reality was quantified in figures. The mechanisms underlying the fiction were paradoxical because they emerged largely from the interventions by the IMF teams, who "forced" the production of figures. So the fiction was underpinned by the work of experts who were also guardians of the norms. Moreover the IMF teams seem to have been particularly blind, since the economic depictions of the country show massive inconsistencies. For example, in 2003 and 2004 the authorities claimed to have enough reserves to convert the entire official money supply, while at the same time the parallel exchange rate was constantly rising, a sign that the monetary authorities did not have enough hard currency

[24] As very clearly described by Richard Harper in *Inside the IMF…*, op. cit.

[25] See A. Blum and M. Mespoulet, *L'Anarchie bureaucratique. Statistique et pouvoir sous Staline*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003.

to stabilize the Mauritanian currency (*ouguiya*). Moreover, this (deliberate?) blindness on the part of the IMF teams mirrored the blackout imposed by the authorities, which maintained silence concerning the economic and financial anarchy. So the social sources of the statistical lies were thus a mixture of widespread deception, "bureaucratic [and financial] anarchy" and authoritarian procedures.

This enables us to understand better how the Mauritanian government was able, in the report it published in 2006 on the revision of the data, to say in substance that it had formulated its economic policies on the basis of erroneous data, which may seem puzzling. In reality, the adoption of formal procedures had been accompanied by the means to circumvent them.

• The collapse of the economic fiction

The fiction fell apart between 2004 and 2005, in the context of a broad movement to deligitimize Taya's power. The starting point for the "discovery" of the lies was a change of regulation at the IMF (safeguards assessment policy), which, in 2003, led the fund's departments to ask for an entirely routine audit of the Central Bank's foreign exchange reserves. But the Mauritanian authorities refused, for fear of being unmasked, particularly as the foreign exchange reserves were one of the most heavily falsified indicators. The government entered into a face-off with the IMF, which it knew it could not win. It seemed inevitable that there would be an audit, which would unavoidably lead to Mauritania being punished for misreporting and would lead to heavy sanctions by the IMF and other donors. The authorities thus tried to gain time and kept the IMF at bay in 2003 and again in 2004. But in the struggle a corner of the veil of deceitful statistics was gradually lifted, revealing illegal practices that proved central to the spiral ending in Taya's downfall.

The statistics crucially masked the plundering of public resources, which had taken place on an unprecedented scale from 2000 and ultimately had untenable consequences. First affected was the national economy, where the decidedly "expansionist" budgetary and monetary policies and the trade in currencies caused a wave of inflation and devaluation of the ouguiya; this caused the prices of food and imported products to shoot up, fostering a sense of frustration and exacerbating discontent. Then there were the consequences for the management of the access to positions of power, Taya being ultimately left behind in the battles over the appropriation of resources. Numerous tensions emerged within the economic elite. For example, the fallout from oil exploitation gave rise to heated exchanges within the "tribally based oligarchy.[26]"And when Taya, which appointed Zeine Ould Zeidane as governor of the Central Bank in the summer of 2004, played the card of confessing its lies at the IMF, the weakened regime made enemies of some of the businessmen closest to the centers of power, who had done very well out the system. So the regime was cut off from its main sources of support. It was rendered still more unstable by the security situation—an attack by the GSPC (Salafist group for preaching and combat) shook the North of the country in the summer of 2004—and by the consequences

[26] B. Augé, "Les enjeux du pétrole en Mauritanie," *L'Année du Maghreb*, III, 2007; A. Bensaâd, "Mauritanie: une révolution de Palais sur fond d'odeur de pétrole," *L'Année du Maghreb*, II, 2005-2006.

of the presidential election fiasco of 2003, which saw Taya re-elected at the price of all kinds of repression used against the opposition and his political opponents.[27] These events in turn encouraged the falsification of the figures, since massive military spending was carried out off-budget in 2003 and 2004, to which was added expenditure on the electoral campaign. All in all the economic fiction was fuelled by a series of elements that combined to delegitimize the regime, while the discovery of the deception made the government's position worse, creating a vicious circle.

So beyond its purely technical significance, the revelation of the falsification of the figures and the end of the economic fiction should be understood as the collapse of a mode of domination. While the revelation of the fiction was triggered and caused by the reserves audit, it represented a far more complex and multiform event.

Here it is interesting to reconsider the mechanisms by which the deception came to be confessed. When Zeine Ould Zeidane arrived at the BCM (Central Bank of Mauritania), he was surprised by the degree of anarchy he found. Having Taya's blessing to sort out the situation at the Central Bank, he went to Washington on his own, in the autumn of 2004, to make a clean breast of it to the IMF and the World Bank. As a young technocrat highly respected by the international organizations, for which he had himself worked (at the World Bank), he was sufficiently direct and enjoyed enough credit for the IMF to decide to trust him. Although a procedure denouncing Mauritanian "misreporting" was launched, the IMF was relatively indulgent, with only a few withdrawals being declared by the Board[28] to be irregular and requiring repayment to the fund. It must be said that the whole affair was very embarrassing to IMF officials, who were shown to have been very casual in their monitoring of Mauritania, had been caught out and indeed felt they had been fooled. So they kept a low profile.

But this episode implies that, paradoxically, relative technocratic autonomy cohabited with procedural anarchy in a manner similar to the role played by the IMF officials who, as described earlier, when faced with impotent national bodies, gave statistical form to what was in fact "financial anarchy." Here technocratic language was used within the dynamics of power: the relationship between the governor and the representatives of the IMF and the World Bank was conducted in terms of procedures, denouncing deceptive government figures, extra-budgetary expenses and irregularities in the management of exchange. We can see that the presence of a technocratic ethos was not incompatible with deception, nor even with power struggles, but reveals the coexistence and accumulation within the state of different relationships to the economy. The work of the technocrats involved wielding economic language in an "ocean of transgression." This process, in which macroeconomics exists in the context of a recalcitrant reality or one where it has no authority, resembles the observations made by Aude Terray and Alain Desrosières in relation to France[29]: macroeconomics and its bureaucratic developments, tools and rationales exist in environments that are resistant to them.

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[27] See A. Bensaâd, "Les répliques d'un coup d'Etat manqué," *L'Année du Maghreb*, I, 2004.

[28] The IMF's managing body.

[29] A. Desrosières, "La naissance d'un nouveau langage statistique entre 1940 et 1960," *Le Courrier des statistiques*, INSEE, no. 108, December 2003; A. Terray, *Des francs-tireurs aux experts. L'organisation de la prévision économique au ministère des Finances, 1948-1968*, Paris, Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 2003.

The Paradoxes of The "Transition to Democracy"

The revision of data took place in different phases, starting from late 2004, over a period covering the end of the Taya era and the "transition to democracy." Taya was overthrown in August 2005, when the military council for justice and democracy (CMJD) was established under President Ely Ould Mohamed Vall.

• The ambivalence of formal and governance-based approaches

Following the coup d'Etat of August 2005, the CMJD's approach was based on the idea of a transition to democracy and a reformist agenda, with a route map for the transfer of power to civilians and the holding of elections. Having reassured the country and its diplomatic partners by undertaking a number of symbolic actions to prove its good will (such as going to Brussels with representatives of the opposition, as a guarantee of a degree of national unity, and freeing political prisoners), it began an 18-month transition period. But the approaches adopted in this period were ambivalent. Beacon measures were taken in relation to politics (democratic elections were held), freedoms (an order on the freedom of the press officially abolished censorship[30] and the creation of High Authorities for the press and audiovisual media [HAPA]) and for the administration, as we shall discuss later. Much was made of the political leadership, who had a good image and included some new faces, while young technocrats were promoted, marking a break with the personnel previously in charge. Some things were done that would have been unthinkable before, including the appointment to government of former members of the opposition, such as President of the Bar Mahfoud Ould Bettah, and the ending of the harassment of Islamists. Given theses circumstances, some Mauritanian intellectuals returned home. The country was undeniably undergoing liberalization and a relaxation of the tension that had prevailed under Taya.

But this was counterbalanced by public management that remained cautious and conservative, often in the guise of prudence: important dossiers such as the return of refugees in 1989 were not dealt with, despite being at the forefront of political tension, because they were regarded as the province of the future regime to be elected; the same was true of "governance," where those in positions of responsibility under Taya faced no consequences for their wrongdoing (and in practice most remained in power, only one of Taya's former ministers being imprisoned, the oil minister Zeidane Ould Hmeida, who was accused of having negotiated contracts that were prejudicial to the country[31]), while an ethereal rhetoric based on governance and reforms became established. The CMJD's mantra was that it would pass only a few priority measures, on the pretext that the transition did not have the legitimacy to conduct a broader reform program, which would be the responsibility of the future elected government. This argument has a degree of ambiguity. The interministerial committees and consultation days

[30] Order no. 2006-17 of July 12, 2006 on press freedom.

[31] We would like to thank one of this study's readers for reminding us of this point.

supposed to guide the transition were confined to formal, superficial approaches to the dossiers. Furthermore Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, the man who was supposedly going to sort everything out, was soon accused of pursuing his own interests and working to enrich himself, notably, it was later discovered, by taking over the mobile licence from Chinguitel and renegotiating the oil contracts mentioned above.[32] The leader's image and the credibility of the transition were further undermined when he tried to muddy the waters in advance of the upcoming presidential election by telling voters to leave their ballot papers blank, which would have enabled him to stay in control. So the elements set out in Mauritania's so-called "transition model" soon lost their clarity.

While the production of an inventory is undoubtedly not the right way to convey the undeniable break that the transition represented, as Mohamed Ould Mohamedou asserts,[33] a formalist approach to the process nevertheless clearly conceals a great ambivalence, which is revealed by a consideration of economic procedures, and particularly that of data revision.

• The data revision: a process of "normalization" against a background of agitation in the economic administration

While the confession seemed to herald the return of a technocratic approach, what followed was ambiguous where the technical services were concerned. The revision of the statistics, which unfolded in several stages between late 2004 and 2006, was largely an ad hoc exercise, sometimes carried out behind closed doors, involving a small number of individuals and ultimately leading to the production of a report on the data revision.[34] This exercise had its primary importance in the context of negotiations with Mauritania's external partners to "rewrite economic history" and establish new, "healthy" starting points. Paradoxically, whether the data revision enhanced the image of the administrative departments and reinforced their role is uncertain. There is a major contrast between, on the one hand, the success of the negotiations that enabled Mauritania to reconnect with the IMF in the first half of 2006 and to benefit from debt rescheduling in the context of the multilateral debt reduction initiative a few months later, and, on the other, the relative apathy that overcame the administration during the transition period.

Several examples allow us to gauge the extent of this. Within the ONS, the methodology used for purposes such as the revision of GDP was open to criticism. In 2006 this office, supported by the IMF, began work to create a new set of official national accounts. But the new accounts were not much better constructed than the old ones and the revision was more of a "firefighting" exercise. Overall the methods used were the same as before and in some respects it is hard to see exactly what difference they made. Some of the old totals were declared trustworthy, when the methods by which they were produced are far from clear (this was

[32] See A. Bensaâd, "Mauritanie: une révolution de Palais…," art. cit.

[33] M. Ould Mohamedou, "Nouvelle production de sens en Mauritanie: le coup d'Etat du 3 août 2005 et sa signification," *L'Année du Maghreb*, III, 2007.

[34] See Islamic Republic of Mauritania, *Rapport sur la révision des données...*, op. cit.

true of agricultural and mining output), while other indicators were recalculated from scratch. Furthermore, the pernicious logic underlying the production of the figures was not questioned. For example, the revision of the accounts preserved estimating techniques that had for years allowed the IMF teams and MAED departments literally to "negotiate" growth rates. These techniques, based on extrapolation from a few often untrustworthy indicators, were open to a great deal of manipulation, since they always ensured that a parameter or calculation method could be adjusted to obtain a growth rate regarded as acceptable (generally between 3 % and 6 %, achieved by adjusting the figures for construction, farming and some other industries).

There is nothing insignificant about these technical details. These were the processes used to construct the fiction. Conversely the revision work carried out with the IMF disrupted another work that had long been underway and was close to fruition, intended precisely to enable the production of more reliable accounts and forecasts (renewing national accounting and forecasting tools with the adoption of a more robust "resources uses balance" approach[35]). So the timing of the data revision required speedy results and can be understood primarily in terms of its short-term objectives, which sometimes involved mechanisms that had engendered the fiction. This is confirmed, albeit in a different way, in other "sectors" where atonement for deception also took an ambiguous turn. The Treasury is a case in point. The transition under the CMJD appointed the highly experienced and committed expert Mohamed Lemine Ould Dhehby, an economist by training and formerly a senior manager in the Budget directorate, to the post of head of the Treasury. He got the accounts into good order, as Zeine had done at the BCM. But the process was ambiguous because the work was done almost entirely by Ould Dhehby himself, who, while fulfilling his function as Director, personally took charge of revising all the data and getting the Treasury back on track, and playing all the roles in the directorate, since his co-workers had largely been discredited. He thus spent long evenings auditing the accounts, establishing the situation of the state finances and producing a flow of funds table. All this work was used to credit the administration with progress that "proved" Mauritania's good will, notably in the eyes of its partners. But it was carried out by a young expert who, though undoubtedly highly gifted, was doing it more or less alone. The same was true of the launch of oil production. The new procedure for publishing monthly oil receipts in conformity with the requirements of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) was the supreme guarantee of Mauritanian good management practice, but in reality relied on the same Treasury Director and an economist within the Mauritanian hydrocarbon company. So "transparency" was dependent on the good will of these two individuals. Armed with their technical approach to problems, they ensured that the administration delivered, formally at least, on its undertakings to improve economic and financial information. But the institutions remained in the background and the transition favored the production of visible results, remaining ambiguous when it came to the transformation of the offices themselves.

Generally speaking the technocratic work carried out as part of the data revision seems ambivalent. It undoubtedly conferred a high degree of legitimacy on the transition, but was part of an approach involving occasional negotiation, with the aim of meeting international

[35] Work carried out with the support of Afristat, the economic and statistical observatory for sub-Saharan Africa, of which Mauritania is a member, and West Afritac, the IMF's center for technical support for West Africa.

requirements as quickly as possible in order to bring the country back into the fold. This did indeed produce the desired result, since the teams from the IMF, the World Bank and the European Commission were satisfied enough for Mauritania to have its multilateral debt definitively written off, a year and a half after the discovery of its statistical deception, thereby completing the HIPC process with general consensus among the creditors.

During this time, and away from this visible activity, economic management procedures never really got back to any kind of "normality," the greater part of the administration being kept in a state of relative apathy. The example of the work on the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) is eloquent in this regard. It was being finalized at the time of the 2005 coup and an extensive consultation process was underway, but it was suddenly ended when the CMJD decided it was not its mission to take over a planning exercise of this kind. Under pressure from donors, who wanted to be able to use it, the work on the PRSP was eventually restarted, but this time it was carried out by a small team. In other words, the national planning document was finalized as a "chamber piece" by a few technocrats, undermining the institutional underpinning of the PRSP. To this extent, while the transition undeniably did mark a break with the past, it seems to have been built on uncertain foundations and indeed to have operated opportunistically, with decisions taken in a discretionary way within ministerial offices. Lastly, it gave a great deal of weight to the work of a few experts, creating a fear that administrative departments might be marginalized. As we shall see, these fears were confirmed by subsequent events.

We shall now change scale to consider more precisely the paradoxical role of technocrats within the Mauritanian administration, and the means by which they were integrated into the conduct of public affairs, notably through markets in expertise.

Technocrats and the exercise of power in Mauritania

We shall start by focussing on technical procedures, starting with two main observations: firstly, technocracy is both a value and a technique of government in Mauritania, despite the "ocean of transgression"; secondly, a variety of heterogeneous repertoires, ranging from misappropriation to the technocratic ethos, may be simultaneously present in the most elementary administrative tasks. To understand this properly, we need to bear in mind that administrative engineering and reform were themselves at the core of a continuous activity that permitted the hybridization of repertoires.

Access to Positions of Power and Modernization

Administrative engineering was central to an important "market in modernization." Technocratic operations received a great deal of finance, both from the state and in the form of aid provided by international donors as part of "capacity building" and "institutional development," which had been development watchwords since the late 1990s.

• Skills, knowledge and the modernization market

Very large sums were devoted to modernizing the state. The 10th European Development Fund (EDF) set great store by governance, with over 40 million euros for the period 2008-2013, of which 17 million were allotted to the modernization of the state. The resulting modernization market undoubtedly engendered a "rent-based economy" leading to spending on a plethora of dubious projects, consultations that were not properly targeted and the organization of workshops with their attendant buffets and director's fees. So it clearly played a role in informal peculation. Such phenomena of course go some way to explaining how an economy of reform may emerge in a situation of informality such as that in Mauritania. But to describe this economy of reform, we need to go further. For example, when a World Bank Trust Fund finances the production of a "poverty profile" or "poverty card," as it did in 2004, and this to the tune of several hundred million of dollars, should we see it as no more than a wafer thin technocratic facade? Not necessarily. To do so would be to forget that, although these technical activities are part of Mauritanian society, with its own divisions and values, managers and leaders of the economic and financial administration do share a technocratic interpretation of reality and, to a certain extent, a belief in the power of technique to underpin ways of governing. To this extent it is possible that "aid rents" and the work they generate, despite being reappropriated in many different ways, may lead to the adoption of "modernizing" practices, informed by knowledge and skills, that ultimately garner some support and foster the emergence of modes of government. Drawing on the work of Béatrice Hibou, we can even seek to identify elements of a "demand for modernization" in this market.[36]

The example of macroeconomic forecasting provides an interesting example of this demand. The macroeconomic modelling that has proliferated in Mauritania in the last ten years is an invariant of capacity building projects, even though the figures were long falsified, and are anyway largely produced at the interface with the IMF. A range of international experts have nevertheless been called on from time to time by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, the ONS and Ministry of Finance, to launch a new study researching the right model. This has happened continuously since the mid-1990s. Organizations approached by the ministries have included the World Bank, INSEE, Afristat and the African Development Bank. How should this be understood? In practice, methods of macroeconomic forecasting are of major practical and

[36] B. Hibou, *Anatomie politique de la domination*, Paris, La Découverte, 2011.

symbolic importance to Directors and top officials in the Ministries of the Economy and Finance[37]. One aim in improving them is to gain greater power in negotiations with the IMF and the World Bank. Moreover, forecasting structures a raft of relationships within the administration. It provides the basis for collaboration (through the transmission of statistical data) and simultaneously for emulation between departments, even in the unstable, compartmentalized conditions we have described. The different Directorates of Finances, Planning and the Central Bank thus compete to have their forecasts prevail, for example, in relation to taxation during the preparation of annual exercises such as the budget, and exchange these forecasts either directly or through the IMF. In addition, models also play a part in international activities, since experiences are exchanged between the teams of forecasters and economists of different countries in sub-Saharan and North Africa, and indeed between oil producing countries,[38] which meet at many international and regional seminars (and regularly, notably, in the context of Afristat). In this way skills and knowledge acquire the status of modes of extraversion. So we can see why in Mauritania there is consequently not only a demand, but also, in a sense, a "race for models". When use of the Memau,[39] Mauritania's historical model hosted by the MAED, gradually fell away, its replacement gave rise to a great many projects, both within the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Ministry of Finances and the Central Bank. While the fortunes of these research projects differed, some produced concrete results (such as the so-called Tablo model, a recent updating of Memau, and the World Bank's PAMS model). And paradoxically, despite the prevailing administrative conditions, the "demand for models" within these directorates never stopped, no doubt maintained by foreign support.

All this suggests that a "technocratic ethos" based on expertise and a certain understanding of ways of "acting on the economy"[40] could exist within administrative departments, and drive their work, even in a context of informality. As a sign confirming the existence of a "demand for modernization" in Mauritania, the expertise market there was not linked solely to the availability of external funding and "extraversion rents." In the modelling field, projects emerged that were financed entirely from within Mauritania. For example, the "Explorer Center," set up in 2003-2004, used its own funds to bring in French researchers from INSEE and ran sessions financed by the Mauritanian state. Moreover, bonuses were long paid to managers in the economic and financial departments who were working to establish macroeconomic parameters.[41] This contextualization of modelling can of course be applied, to different degrees, to many other techniques. Typically, some instruments in fashion in the development world, such as "medium term expenditure frameworks," exerted an attraction over administrative departments.[42] This

[37] On the case of Burkina Faso, see B. Samuel, "Le cadre stratégique de lutte contre la pauvreté et les trajectoires de la planification au Burkina Faso," *Sociétés politiques comparées*, no. 16, August 2009.

[38] Indonesia offered support with the production of models for the PAGEP project in 2006.

[39] The Model of the Mauritanian Economy (Memau) was created with the support of the German Cooperation in the mid-1990s.

[40] A. Desrosières, "Historiciser l'action publique: l'Etat, le marché et les statistiques," in P. Laborier and D. Trom (eds), *Historicités de l'action publique*, Paris, PUF, 2003.

[41] Now that these bonuses have been questioned, forecasting has suffered.

[42] See B. Samuel, "Le cadre stratégique de lutte contre la pauvreté…," art. cit.

attraction exerted by technical productions, rarely considered in discussions of the work of administrative departments in Africa, was very real, however paradoxical. Technocratic activity was promoted and expanded through the "modernization market," which was itself largely if not exclusively funded by "extraversion rents."

• The emergence of an expert elite

Moreover it is notable that technocratic and technical competences led to the formation of dominant groups, even if their skills were later lost in an administration operating primarily through the interplay of influence and accommodation. So for ten years a small group of high-ranking officials with the profile of international experts controlled Mauritania's finances, steered the economy and guided the "reforms" from within a small club of relatively stable economic and financial institutions (MAED, ONS, Mauritanian Centre for Policy Analysis (CMAP), Ministry of Finance, BCM). The managers of these institutions worked very closely together and were generally products of the major European training establishments (such as CERDI, ENSAE and ENA); they had often taken the same courses and had since developed a sense of solidarity. The functioning of the Mauritanian administrative system facilitated the rapid rise of technocrats, some very brilliant, who were of course appreciated by donors and lenders and ran the country from the administrative departments of the economics and finance ministries. Some also moved on to the political stage. This was true of Zeine Ould Zeidane who, in a few years, moved from running a macroeconomic model in a small Planning department office to the post of Prime Minister, with stopovers at the directorate of the CMAP, followed by the Central Bank. In the course of this rise, he built up a reputation for technical skills[43] (and people skills, since he is married to the daughter of General Boukhreiss, one of Taya's former chiefs of staff). But in this he followed a long line of politicians who made their careers on, among other things, their image as technocrats, such as former Prime Minister Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar, who owed his consensual role during the transition to his image as a considered and enlightened expert, and Mohamedou Ould Michel, who has just retired but was still an advisor to the President after a long career under Taya.

The recent period has the emergence of new figures, such as the young Treasury Director Mohamed Lemine Ould Dhehby, soon to be very rapidly promoted to posts of responsibility on the basis of his skills and knowledge. Of course we are not seeking to turn these figures into virtuous "heroes," but to emphasize that, contrary to what is generally believed,[44] "models of success" also value the role of technocratic competence in driving successful careers and relationships of domination. This is evidenced by the fact that legitimation by competence combines with other repertoires and visions of power. Director and later Minister of Planning Abdallahi Ould Cheikh Sidya was the illustrious descendant of a marabout family and an ENA graduate who

[43] To be persuaded of this, one needs only to consult the Wikipedia page devoted to him, which mentions these various technocratic feats, notably in relation to modelling.

[44] See R. Banégas and J.-P. Warnier, "Nouvelles figures de la réussite et du pouvoir," *Politique africaine*, no. 82, June 2001.

long remained typical of the elite and was respected as much for his prestigious birth as for his competent image. That he was, as head of Planning before 2004, one of the architects of the great falsification operation did not affect his prestige. There is nothing unusual about this according to the values of the Mauritanian *tcheb-tchib*, which in this case combine with technical and aristocratic repertoires.[45] Moreover we should not be understood as denying the fact that appointments are often based on influence, nepotism and tribal and ethnic criteria.[46] Of course many managers find their careers blocked because of their ethnic or tribal origins, which may influence the course of their entire careers. But competence and technical skills are evident criteria in the rise of many Mauritanian figures and underpin one vision of the state and government.

Their importance changes with fluctuations in the political conjuncture and the desire to promote members of the technocratic elite. Recently, under Aziz, high-ranking officials reputed to be competent have often been bypassed on the pretext of their involvement in the "bad management" of the past. But this argument is primarily used to sideline particular people and maintain allegiances, since former Tayists and representatives of his stable of technocrats continue to occupy a great many posts in the upper levels of the administration today, starting with the current Finance Minister, Thiam Diombar, who was for a while the unshiftable assistant director of the Budget office, to which he held all the keys; or Sidi Ould Didi, ambassador to Dakar, quintessential member of the Tayacracy and former director of the Budget at the time of the massive misappropriations of funds in 2002.

At any rate we should not be surprised by these hybrid repertoires. The profiles of technocrats can provide a source of legitimacy even when circumvention of the rules is the rule itself. In the moral economy of *tcheb-tchib* described by Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, technical dexterity and understanding are certainly not discredited; indeed they are very useful to the *el-gazra*, the squatter skilled in the use of trickery to appropriate public resources.[47] From this point of view there is no inevitable contradiction between the valuing of competence, the modernizing ethos and transgressive management practices in the administration, in which these same officials are also involved, as we shall show.

To understand the power of the technocracy, we need to acknowledge the existence of concrete mechanisms of power, in which the use of technocratic competence combines with the quest for gain.

• Overlaps between positions of "reform" and peculation

The positions of technocrats and technical practices are predicated on the "bureaucratic anarchy[48]" of Mauritanian administrative management. But how does this work in practice? An instrumental reading would assume that governance reforms seek to prevent the diversion

[45] See Z. Ould Ahmed Salem, "'Tcheb-tchib' et compagnie...," art. cit.

[46] See P. Marchesin, *Tribus ethnies et pouvoirs...*, op. cit.

[47] Z. Ould Ahmed Salem, "'Tcheb-tchib' et compagnie...," art. cit.

[48] A. Blum and M. Mespoulet, *L'Anarchie bureaucratique...*, op. cit.

of funds and quest for gain. But a "bottom-up" analysis of practices shows on the contrary that the repertoires of modernization can combine with those of peculation in the everyday management of public administration, overlapping in various ways. The first, and obvious, example is the private consultancy work undertaken by many officials. This is of course an extremely widespread practice. All technically effective officials can expect to gain consultancy contracts in the specialist fields they work in as public servants, and of course render their administrative posts profitable through the revenue generated by their private work. We shall return to this later, as another, less obvious overlap must be noted. The accumulation of different administrative functions sometimes enables individuals to combine a number of tasks that give them direct access to resources with work on administrative engineering and reform intended to improve management. Because activities in both fields are performed by the same people, they can be subject to a kind of vertical integration, thereby creating wide margins for maneuver, particularly where falsification is concerned. A paradigmatic illustration of this is offered by the directorate of education and training projects, which, until 2007, was in charge of reforming the education sector.[49] This directorate conducted all the reforms seeking to establish good management in the education sector, carried out periodic evaluations of aid programs and organized annual reviews and field visits; but it was also responsible for the effective use of the corresponding funds, provided by the international Education For All (EFA) initiative via the national programme for the development of the education sector (PNDSE). It long had access to parallel finance at both the Ministry of Education and the National Budget Directorate, an arrangement often criticized for its opacity (although the aid provided for this program was "budgetized" in the donors' eyes by going into a common pot, it made only a rapid detour through the Treasury coffers). The man who was long the director of education and training, Weddoud Kamil, is known for his technical abilities—he is an international expert on education planning—but was much criticized for the opacity of his management. We should mention that he is also the son-in-law of Maaouya Ould Taya.

In practice such situations are common. People at the MAED prepare the budget for state investment, supervise the transfer of funds to project heads and prepare the statistics ultimately supposed to evaluate macroeconomic performance and respect for expenditure ceilings. The same people are thus in a position both to promote the new tools of rigor, for which they benefit from training and capacity building programs, and to falsify the figures, so they develop a highly polysemous relationship to the "sums." Such mechanisms explain how, in Mauritania as in almost all the countries of Africa, state expenditure was underestimated in order to get round the ceilings set by the IMF.

• "Marginal gains" linked to skills and knowledge

We could even go so far as to state that certain economic policy operations can in fact be assimilated to "transactions" combining predatory activities with the mobilization of skills and knowledge: we have heard witnesses speak of extreme cases in which statistical tables

[49] But part of the MAED rather than the Ministry of Education.

relating to the public finances were bought from high-ranking civil servants by international officials. The justification given was that these tables were not immediately accessible and required a degree of expertise. In addition, they were vital to the writing of an evaluation report that had to be drawn up by the international financial institutions. Such cases are very interesting, because they combine many elements in a single "transaction," from technical competence and the production of a complex piece of work, to the repertoire of individual interest, the official's capitalizing on his knowledge and skills and "privatizing[50]" administration for his own profit, the production of a narrative of the economy and state action that fuels the fiction of the figures and the practices of international organizations, which seek to produce figures at any price. While such configurations may seem commonplace in the interaction between intermediaries that surrounds the "state in Africa," we can gauge their socio-political importance in explaining the output of technical productions claiming to describe "statistical reality." Such mechanisms—which very precisely materialize the "marginal gains" described by the anthropologist Jane Guyer in elucidating the functioning of formal state processes[51]—help us understand how the Mauritanian "economic fiction" was able to emerge and take shape through a concrete combination of different and apparently contradictory repertoires operating within procedures for the "management" of the public finances.

Lastly, it is important to understand that the blurred boundary between various administrative functions fosters hybrids of technical and "modernizing" positions with the receipt of rents. The intertwining and overlapping of "lucrative" activities, official functions and reform mean that an ethos of modernization can blossom in the shadow of networks of influence, all in the name of promoting a state underpinned by law and rationality. The polysemous, ambivalent nature of reforms and technocratic activities are well known. Such hybrids also explain how forms of domination can emerge out of modernizing activities, by enabling groups to rise through the state apparatus on the basis of their skills and knowledge. It could be said that this helps, more or less paradoxically, to lay the foundations for "technocratic legitimacy"[52] in concrete terms.

A "Technocratic Event": The Consultative Group of 2007

At this point in our discussion we come to a description of the "democratic" period, opening with the elections of April 2007 that brought President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi to power. The consultative group meeting held in Paris in December 2007, with the aim of enabling donors to fulfil their promises, brings together the scenarios and repertoires we have mentioned. It is interesting to look at them again in order to relocate technocratic issues within the economic and political trajectory of Mauritania. The consultative group rewarded the process of democratization with contributions of international finance and called for reforms

[50] On the privatization of administrative activities, see B. Hibou (ed.), *La Privatisation des Etats*, Paris, Karthala, 2001.

[51] J. Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004.

[52] See B. Hibou, *Anatomie politique de la domination*, op. cit.

to continue in what was supposed to be the "logical continuation" of the transition. The event required an unprecedented bureaucratic production and was a technical feat for Mauritania's administrative departments, which had to provide highly developed plans. But this technocratic success was also underpinned by an interplay of individual interests. Moreover, behind the image of success, the group meetings revealed the faultlines of political instability that prevailed after the election of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and led to the putsch of August 2008. In this sense, this moment is interesting because it shows how technocracy, which was in principle a vehicle for legitimacy, also reflected the divisions of the period and indeed a degree of instability. In a sense it shows us an attempt at legitimation by technical skills and knowledge, in a context where the government was increasingly losing legitimacy.

• The return of the model country: "good practice" and personal interests

To understand the origins of the consultative group we have to go back a little to the period of the Military Committee for Justice and Democracy. During 2006 the work that had been halted after the fall of Taya in the summer of 2005 was gradually restarted. The PRSP, left dormant by a transition government that had not thought it had room to conduct a planning exercise, was restarted on the insistence of donors, who needed a program on which to base their support for the transition. Discussions with the IMF and the World Bank again raised the need for a "medium term expenditure framework" (MTEF), in order to identify the broad choices for state expenditure. A working group on the MTEF thus met in 2006, comprizing the Ministries of the Economy and Finance and various peripheral actors (the Mauritanian Centre for Policy Analysis, capacity building projects and so on). The exercise proved complex and laborious for the administration. Collaboration between the administrative directorates of the Ministries of the Economy and Finance proved difficult and the working group did not really seem to be a priority for the budget directorate and the new directorate of development strategies at the MAED. The transition and its major political maneuvers were underway, elections were in prospect and large scale administrative studies were out of favor with the directorates. In addition, the macroeconomic data revision was still fresh, whereas the preparation of an MTEF demanded an unprecedented abundance of details. Moreover Mauritania was bringing in its first oil receipts and plans for the use of budgetary resources were far from settled. All these elements made the exercise difficult in this transition period of relative immobilism.

The resident representative of the World Bank, who had recently arrived in the country, was working hard to use his time there as a launchpad for his own rise through his organization. He wanted to turn Mauritania into an example of "best practice." To this end he planned to promote the development of a collaborative CAS[53] for the World Bank, based on the national poverty reduction policy, which would then make it possible to set up a "model" consultative group. Once the Mauritanian transition was well underway, the representative's plan had certain attractions: it was indeed important to undertake strong action to give weight to the reprise of partnerships between the government and donors, who were actively sponsoring

[53] Country Assistance Strategy.

democratization. The change in the country needed to be marked and the new hope supported.

For this it was crucial to have an MTEF as the underlying program. But work on the MTEF in the Ministry of Finance and the MAED was behind schedule. The resident representative became impatient and besieged the office at the Ministry of Economic Affairs, physically and by telephone, even sharply expressing his displeasure to the Prime Minister.[54] Eventually, wearied by the lack of success encountered by his initiative, he looked around for alternative solutions and seized the opportunity offered by other ongoing research to get round the difficulties. In the absence of any good and proper program of the MTEF type, he fell back on far simpler, more general calculations of the sums necessary to "attain the millennium development objectives." Such calculations were carried out by both the UNDP and the World Bank. The exercise was not on the same scale as the work demanded by the MTEF, but it made it possible to start discussions on the "collaborative CAS." He enjoyed the crucial support of the Minister of Economic Affairs, Mohamed Ould Abed, a high flying civil servant, graduate of the ENA and éminence grise of many reforms carried out by the government since the late 1990s. He also relied on a young and very well-informed technocrat, Mohyedine Ould Sidi Baba, born among the great tents of northern Mauritania and another graduate of the ENA, who was a rising star in the administration at the time.[55]

So a major exercise was carried out in 2006–2007 involving donors, the state administration and civil society, to plan Mauritania's development strategies. The initiative generated major events: in March 2006 large gatherings were organized using video-conferencing in multiplexes in several countries. The exercise was in tune with its time, giving rise to various presentations permitting the development of a form of language unconstrained by the empty bureaucratic rhetoric of the Taya era. As well as policies, debates focused on the functioning of Mauritanian society and barriers within it and the challenges of good management, in politico-technocratic arenas unused to such discussions. So the resident representative successfully pulled off his tour de force of collaboration, driven by his personal ambitions and supported by the administration, with which he had very close relations. This process, which remained technically unconvincing and very much focused on the World Bank was nonetheless gradually transformed into a "technocratic feat" on the part of the regime.

• Technocratic feat and "democratization bonus"

After the election of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in April 2007, work began on the preparation of a consultative group celebrating democracy. Work on the MTEF started up again, this time based on the broad orientations of the brand new Ministry of the Economy and Finance. For the first time in Mauritania, detailed budgetary planning was undertaken, based on the PRSP and the funding intentions of the donors. The Ministry of the Economy and Finance, reunified, provided the right framework for this kind of work, which required collaboration between the Budget directorate and the directorate responsible for cooperation and planning. This

[54] According to the account given to me by the person concerned in Nouakchott in 2006.

[55] He was at that time head of the Public Sector Capacity Building Project (Prescasp) financed by the World Bank.

collaboration went well, thanks to a great many executives, including Mohyedine Ould Sidi Baba, who was soon appointed as Director General of development and economic cooperation within the ministry, and some of Zeine Ould Zeidane's former collaborators at the CMAP, who had been given jobs in various organizations, while Zeine himself was now Prime Minister. A former director of studies and development strategies at MAED and his successor at the head of the CMAP, El Hassen Ould Zein, was also appointed as advisor to the Prime Minister, and became very involved in the dossier. The preparation for the group achieved something hitherto unimaginable in the Mauritanian administration due to an impressive combination of favorable factors, including extensive involvement by donors, the input of highly experienced technocrats, a relative absence of barriers to the circulation of information and circumstances —"successful" democratization—that justified holding Mauritania up as an international example. The MTEF reflected an active development policy and put the price of the "return of hope" at 1.6 billion dollars. The donors met at the World Bank's offices in Paris on December 4, 5 and 6, 2007, established their contributions and, in a major bureaucratic exercise, transformed Mauritania into a pro-active country determined to pursue "reforms." The group ultimately promised donations of 2.1 billion dollars, 500 million more than the sum requested by the government—a "democratization bonus" as Zeine Ould Zeidane put it.[56]

• Fictional planning and political impasse

However, these plans were never realized, since Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was removed from power by Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz in the summer of 2008, barely eight months after the meeting of the consultative group. The coup d'Etat led to the suspension of all cooperation programs for around a year, until the spring of 2009. It is interesting to see that, technocratic feats notwithstanding, the consultative group also contained all the seeds of the future instability.

In practice the consultative group straddled the regime's internal divisions. The government was a patchwork resulting from the horse-trading of appointments between the various currents and spheres, including military personnel from the CMJD, who got Sidi elected and imposed appointments on him, Sidi himself, who was bound by the political agreements he had made (such as that with Messaoud Ould Boulkheir's movement), and Zeine Ould Zeidane, who had exchanged his support in the second round for the post of Prime Minister. The governmental equation was thus complex from the outset and a source of conflict. The consultative group's role in all this was not neutral. It gave Zeine an opportunity to impose his style through a technocratic process of which he was the prime embodiment. Indeed the Prime Minister was counting on this to save his political future. He was in a very vulnerable position: he did not control his government and he was in dispute with the President, who had relieved him of the management of the most important dossiers, notably the return of refugees and the emergency food program linked to the crisis of 2007-2008. So the consultative group was very important to him, beyond the beauty of the exercise and its promises of development. The technocratic

[56] See, on the site of the journal *Jeune Afrique*, Marianne Meunier's interview with Zeine Ould Zeidane, December 20, 2007.

aspect, a key strength of Sidi's regime,[57] thus appears at once as the element supposed to save the government's image and the focus of the internal quarrels that were accelerating the same government's loss of legitimacy and destroying its ability to govern. Moreover these struggles were apparent at the time of the Paris meeting, when Abderrahmane Ould Hama Vezzaz, Minister of the Economy and Finance and one of the President's men, also wanted to profit from the event. The group provided an opportunity for public spats between the Prime Minister and his Minister of the Economy and Finance.[58]

But aside from these things, and more seriously, this technocratic orientation crystallized the discontent of the Mauritanian people and helped speed up the regime's inevitable loss of legitimacy and credibility. The government was regularly accused of hiding behind piles of expert reports and being unable to meet expectations where the most important dossiers were concerned, in a context marked by intense social problems and rising prices.[59] Furthermore the reforms and good management that had for a while been hoped for from this "democratically" elected government of technocrats now seemed largely illusory. For example, complaints were mounting concerning the activities of President Abdallahi's inner circle, notably his wife Khattou, who was accused of diverting public money intended for social policies via her charity KB. The Special Intervention Programme, worth 169 million euros, was in practice carried out off-budget and gave rise to many instances of diversion of funds. An examination of financial policies also shows that the government had largely instrumentalized budgetary processes. The establishment of a computer program for monitoring expenditure, known as the Rachad application, had been a beacon financial reform of 2006, symbolizing the guaranteed transparency of the public finances; however, in 2007 and 2008, the government blocked this application for several months in order to circumvent it. Also, while there was much talk of reform and the Prime Minister was indisputably one of the country's most renowned technocrats, machinations and circumventions of technocratic procedures were legion, reflecting the dominance of power relations.

It would probably be an exaggeration to suggest that the technocratic orientation of the regime and its attendant paradoxes were a cause of the subsequent divorce between government and citizens, but these factors were undeniably positioned at the intersection of several fault lines that caused the regime to fall. In one sense the halting of the consultative group's work by the August 2008 coup d'Etat also signified the failure of a Mauritania that had played the card of formal procedures throughout the transition process. Although technocratic rhetoric was never a match for the social issues, the government had instigated sophisticated technical exercises and tried to profit from them through external rents and a modernizing rhetoric that international donors often encouraged. But the main effect of this approach was to discredit the regime and increase disappointment. For a while technocratic constructions had maintained the fiction of successful transition, but at the same time they fuelled instability and disappointment.

[57] See M. Meunier, "Les hommes du président," *Jeune Afrique*, March 31, 2008.

[58] See M. Fall Ould Oumère's editorial, "Groupe consultatif: la bataille de Paris fera-t-elle des victimes à Nouakchott?," *La Tribune*, c378, December 12, 2007; on their conflict, see "Conflit ouvert entre le PM et le ministre de l'Economie et des Finances," *Le Véridique*, June 22, 2008.

[59] See "Le glas a-t-il sonné pour Zeine Ould Zeidane?," *Tahalil Hebdo*, November 6, 2007.

The Mauritania of Aziz: a "vulnerable" country supported in its war against terror

So now we come to the most recent period, which opens with the coup d'Etat of August 2008. The regime of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was overthrown by General Ould Abdel Aziz, who established a "rectificatory period." As justification for his coup d'Etat—perpetrated in the name of the "preservation of democracy"—he notably cited the former president's management practices and actions judged irresponsible for national security, at a time when Mauritania was shaken by terrorist attacks. The management practices of the new regime have since also come under the spotlight, the government being accused (by the people, the official opposition and recently by a section of the ruling majority) of instrumentalizing the management of public finances and stripping the administration of its ability to act on the pretext of combating waste.

Continuing the approach we have adopted up until now, the study of administrative activities will now enable us to investigate the current reconfigurations, notably the repositioning of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and analysis of the Round Table for Mauritania of July 2010 (which took up where the consultative group left off in 2007). New ways of doing things and new modes of government are now emerging. While techniques for raising finance are moving away from the earlier preoccupation with technocratic sophistication, they remain central to the regime, in a context marked by the transformation of the "democratization bonus" into "security rent"; planning procedures are creating new margins for discretionary maneuvring, which seem to reflect the regime's new style of power; lastly, the development of the tentacular "rhizome state[60]" coincides with a repositioning of the technocratic elite, riven by divisions linked to the new regime, while "modernization markets" seem to offer a means to control this elite, which has today largely moved into the private sector. Ultimately our analysis raises the question of the current regime's capacity to renew techniques of control on the basis of economic procedures.

Economic Policies under The Regime of Abdel Aziz: New Kinds of Economic Intervention?

Today the MAED is often cited as an example of a weakened administration. Since 2008 the post of director has been filled by a series of risky appointments, which is unusual for a department that acts as a launch pad for high-flying administrative and political careers.[61] Furthermore its output is often judged to be at a standstill, by both aid agencies and former or current officials. However, leaving aside any nostalgia for the lost splendors of the ministry

[60] See J.-F. Bayart, *L'Etat en Afrique*, Paris, Fayard [1989], 2006.

[61] See "Nominations au MAED: mes amis d'abord," Boluumbal.org, March 28, 2011.

and its directorates, its functioning also seems to reflect a new way of governing the economy, which we should like to consider here.

To understand the ministry's current position, we must first take a detour through its institutional past. It is important to note that the Ministries of the Economy and Finance were unified in 2007, during the presidency of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, in a move regarded at the time as "good practice." However, the graft did not take, notably because the unified ministry became the focal point for too many important issues within a government torn between multiple allegiances. The combined ministry was once again separated into two parallel offices in the putsch of the summer of 2008. But the readoption of this structure did not bring about a return to the historic division of tasks. In the separation the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Development lost its historic role in preparing and managing the investment budget, which included all donor projects. This decision was taken when Sid Ahmed Ould Raiss[62] was Minister of Finance. Later he was to become one of the most influential men in Aziz's regime. This has led to the MAED appearing as something of an "empty shell" compared to its former power, which is a matter of regret for many observers. However, such a view seems a little hasty, since the ministry has acquired a new position and role.

The first point to note is that for a long time one source of the MAED's power was the aura it acquired from its links with many very important development projects, of which it was stripped by the transition. Project cells—education projects, urban development programed, capacity building projects—previously placed under the direct responsibility of the MAED, were handed over to sectoral ministries in 2007. For years their attachment to the MAED had been criticized by international organizations as an infringement of governance, but they had contributed greatly to making it a center of power. Responsibility for these many projects and programs has recently been returned to the MAED. As some commentators have noted, this can be certainly justified by the insufficiencies of the sectoral ministries, which are too weak, but aside from such arguments it remains the case that the MAED is once more playing a pivotal role, intervening in many different sectors, and indeed concentrating power in the hands of economic administrators, which is somewhat reminiscent of the Taya period. This institutional dimension is interesting to note because it seems to reflect a more general redeployment of state intervention in the economy, with a great many ramifications now developing that are worthy of analysis. One major development under Aziz has been the proliferation of agencies, public enterprises and organizations. A national agency for monitoring major projects (ANSP), directly linked to the president's office, was created in 2010, with the task of monitoring and, theoretically, evaluating "presidential" projects, which are largely carried out off-budget. Many public enterprises (a dozen in the field of transport alone) have also been set up to pursue many different objectives, but their dubious justifications and opacity are criticized by both the opposition and the World Bank and the IMF, since they generate major costs, if only through salaries and debts.[63] Some observers from international organizations are of the opinion that none of the existing enterprises functions within the norms, apart from the Mauritanian national

[62] Campaign director of the president in 2009 and chief negotiator at the Dakar process in 2009.

[63] See, for example, "Souveraine gabegie," *Union des forces de progrès*, April 21, 2011.

industrial and mining company SNIM.[64] Currently there is also talk of creating a deposit bank that would receive aid from Morocco. So we should read the evolution of the MAED in parallel to this proliferation of channels of economic intervention, which contributes to the expansion of the rhizome state[65] and recalls the atomization of the public sector under Taya, which paved the way for informalization.

We can supplement this observation, which suggests that the MAED has regained importance through channels other than the canonical approaches of budgetary policy, by considering one of the other historic focuses of the ministry, the quest for finance. It does indeed seem that, despite the ministry's decline, its financial science remains intact and still acts as one of its lungs, at any rate judging by the round table of 2010.

The current strategy of the MAED for raising finance seems very clear. The Minister, Sidi Ould Tah, an ally of the Prime Minister, proved very skilful at the round table held in Brussels in July 2010. Different approaches were used with each of the different donor "types," with different issues at stake in each case. Western donors and international organizations affiliated to the CAD and OECD, heirs to the classic conception of development aid, were at the center of the event, which rekindled the flame of the consultative group of 2007. Then there were the Arab donors who, though they do not shun the strategic deliberations of the OECD, have very different networks and modes of management. Their approach was primarily financial and they were interested above all in good ratings, to be sure of getting their money back, so dialogue around policies did not interest them in the same way. It is often said that, unlike the Europeans, they are prepared to finance works of disputed usefulness, as in the case of the Atar-Tidjikja road across the North of the country. So, as dialogue with them took a different form, they were given a separate round table held a few weeks later. This was the second time this judicious format was adopted, the first being in 2007. Lastly negotiations with the Chinese were different again, tending to operate in semi-commercial modes (around the eventual purchase of raw materials for example) and remained separated. Recently the possibility of a third round table for the Chinese has been frequently raised, more or less ironically, reflecting the many efforts made by the current minister to find Chinese finance, which have been a subject of sarcasm and debate.[66] The fact is that Chinese finance is important for the regime, both for the commission it generates, as denounced by many observers, and because it has become strategically crucial in a context where European aid is drying up and there are uncertainties in relation to the Arabs.[67] Overall the MAED appears highly effective in deploying the science of raising external finance for the economy.

In practice, while the ministry now often has trouble fulfilling some of its official functions, it does carry out other roles.

[64] As the latter has access to the financial markets, its situation is very different.

[65] See J.-F. Bayart, *L'Etat en Afrique…*, op. cit.

[66] As in the case of the recent fishing contracts with the Chinese company Poly Hondone. See *Le Quotidien de Nouakchott*, "Convention d'établissement MAED-Poly Hondone: quand le MAED parle chinois à l'Assemblée!," June 5, 2011.

[67] See *Le Quotidien de Nouakchott*, "Sidi Ould Tah dans les bras de Pékin," January 6, 2011

• Is public decision-making becoming centralized?

What can we say about economic planning and former feats of bureaucracy? A glance at the techniques used at the round table may go some way to providing an answer. In a major contrast with the consultative group, it was impossible for the services of the MAED and Finance ministry to bring an MTEF or budgetary program to the round table. One of the main reasons was the sudden transfer of functions between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economic Affairs. The departments no longer work readily together and, according to some managers, Finance ministry departments no longer want to have to account for the allocation of funds in planning exercises; meanwhile the MAED no longer has the technical means to undertake a planning exercise. So, in contrast to the sophistication of the consultative group of 2007, at the round table a simple list of "priority projects" requiring finance was put forward. True, this did form a basis for discussions with donors and, in the MAED departments, no effort was spared to make it as "consistent" as possible with "needs." What is interesting in this situation, apart from the administrative compartmentalization that seems to have returned with a vengeance, is that such a list easily opens the door to various interventions and manipulations by the president: indeed after the MAED departments had done their work, the list was substantially amended to include promises and undertakings the President had previously given; projects he had promised while touring the country and problem neighbourhoods and other urban and rural planning projects were included in this "priority investment program." The new technocratic organization of the MAED thus opens up new margins for discretionary actions that shift positions around technical productions.

• Income from the fight against terrorism and an international carte blanche

To conclude our discussion of the issue of finance, one very important point should be noted: aid issues are today posed in radically different terms from those of the previous regime, due to the terrorist threat which served to justify the 2008 coup d'Etat. The importance of this situation is evident from both the conduct of the round table and the way it was planned and prepared. The government abandoned the fine figure-based models of the MTEF, but was able to focus on the problem of security in emphasizing its need for finance. So the first chapter of the report presented at the Round Table for Mauritania dealt with "geostrategic" issues, calling on the countries present to show "international solidarity" and fulfil their duty to "help each other." An entire paper was devoted to this issue, also reflected in the country's "strategic orientations" in the dossier prepared for the round table.[68] In the context that has prevailed in Mauritania, we know what role is played by these factors in the positioning of international actors.[69] So the emphasis given to the different rhetorics seems to have changed, with the MTEF no longer necessary, but support for the vulnerable state becoming the cornerstone of arguments for raising finance.

[68] See, for example, the synthesis document of May 31, 2010 produced for the round table by the government: "La stabilité et le développement de la Mauritanie: un impératif pour la sécurité régionale et internationale."

[69] See A. Antil, "Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz l'alchimiste," *L'Année du Maghreb*, VI, 2010.

Taking a symmetrical view, we should also note the willingness of foreign donors to support Aziz's regime. The round table itself ended with promises of generous gifts (3.2 billion dollars). But more generally, the cooperation agencies seem to have given Aziz's regime carte blanche, probably because of the fight against terrorism. The delegation from the European Commission has made budgetary aid a current priority, even if assurances in relation to governance are far from established, and indeed are worse than ever, and though the same European Commission had always refused to grant budgetary aid for that very reason. Furthermore, some knowledgeable observers let it be understood that IMF departments are under current instructions not to pay too much attention to Mauritania, because it is dealing with certain difficulties. And we have had confirmation from within public bodies that recently the Fund's teams have indeed proved less than meticulous, even in their methods of working with figures. Some departments are very happy about the independence that the current IMF teams are giving to the administration. So the regime seems to be enjoying a security rent that has material repercussions for the conduct of bureaucratic activities, as reflected in discussions with the IMF and the conduct of the round table.

• Administration in decline… to the benefit of a group of private experts?

Overall, while the MAED is often presented as weakened, what we have just described indicates a new mode of power and transformations in governing practices. One last element supports this interpretation.

The administration has indeed been stripped of its responsibilities and many high-ranking officials have sought refuge in consultancy work. The boom in consultancies would seem to be a characteristic of the period, to the point where we might wonder whether this market does not represent a gradual privatization of administrative tasks.[70] Where national exercises are concerned, consultancy does seem to be expanding in the Mauritanian market, probably more systematically than before; for example, the PRSP and exercises such as consultative groups use consultants. It has become commonplace to set up a consultancy and the market is flourishing. There probably has been a rise in demand for expertise in recent years, notably from foreign donors, since the wave of international support that followed the fall of Taya. Several factors suggest that today consultancies occupy a space left vacant by the administration and that they have a stabilizing role in the interplay of networks in the political arena. In the field of economics and statistics, some consultancies, such as that of Sidna Ould N'dah, former head of the ONS, and Didi Ould Biye, also a former high ranking official in the administration, seem in fact to be extensions of the administration. Sidna's city center consultancy is today the lair of "former managers." The vast premises, with its offices, internet connection and large conference room, has become an important meeting place. Sidna himself was one of Taya's high officials, ousted following the coup d'Etat of 2005. He was the great Director General responsible for building the headquarters of the ONS, enjoying an excellent reputation among

[70] On the many modalities of privatization and "unloading," see B. Hibou (ed.), *La Privatisation des Etats…*, op. cit.

his partners and simultaneously known for his acquisition of great personal wealth while running the state, for his political ambition and his tribalism. He is also a Mauritanian expert recognized abroad. Today his consultancy enables him to tender for work and coordinate many different activities, accumulating contracts with international organizations and the state. Sidna still talks like a Director General; he uses "we" when talking to officials and when describing what the government should do in the future. In a sense he has remained a Director General, while also being a consultant and gaining a new air of freedom. He is moreover an active member of the ADIL party, which includes many former top officials from the Taya period, having become allied with Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi and followed his former Prime Minister into the party. After the putsch of 2008, they did not support the seizure of power by Aziz and joined the National Front for the Defence of Democracy (FNDD). However, since then they have moved closer to the President and are hoping to participate in public life. But Aziz, who claims to have broken with the former chiefs[71] and is on appalling terms with the former Prime Minister, is very cautious in relation to this party. He recently signed agreements to include it in the presidential majority, but has not kept his promises where appointments are concerned. On the other hand, he has not blocked them either. And while Sidna has not exactly been co-opted by those in power, he has not been left out either; he has in a sense been put in reserve through the consultancy market, as have many of his peers. We can shed light on the luxury back seat role given to consultancies by noting that, when those who formerly held posts of responsibility have not followed the desired political direction they are "ostracized" by being deprived of consultancy opportunities. This shows how the market can be used as a means of control and thus regulate the political sphere. Today consultation is perhaps a way of recycling former elites and carrying out administrative work and, at the same time, in disciplinary terms, a way of keeping control over a section of the population and Mauritania's high level technocrats by regulating their access to resources in a clientelist system. It represents both the margins for maneuver in modern Mauritania and some of the system's ways of accommodating and attenuating what is often authoritarian domination. But the price of all this is an ever-growing informalization.

[71] To counter Aziz, Sidi had appointed a government recycling old chiefs from the Republican, Democratic and Social Party (PRDS), with Yahya Ould Waghef as Prime Minister.

Conclusion

We have described the transformations of the state in Mauritania in the period 2003-2011 in terms of the concrete practices of economic policy management. Our approach questions the relationship to the state in a context of massive informality and where circumvention of the rules and misappropriation are major political repertoires. Nevertheless, our observations suggest that it is useful to study the rules and formal procedures in concrete terms in order to decode the way that they structure power relations in Mauritania, and that this analysis can be used to investigate the transformations of the state.

Some general points emerge. It would seem that the existence of a technocratic ethos is not incompatible with massive circumvention of the rules; more precisely we can observe a superimposition of different relationships to the economy within the state. Moreover, technical competence is a legitimate repertoire of Mauritanian politics. Indeed to some extent it conditions upward social mobility and the rise to positions of power, and, informality notwithstanding, there is a technocratic elite in Mauritania. Moreover, even in this uneven environment, a modernizing ethos exists in the shadow of peculation and becomes hybridized with personal interests in the concrete activities of the administration.

On this basis we propose a reinterpretation of Mauritania's political trajectory seen through the prism of the concrete practices of economic management. This reveals that, despite major deception in relation to macroeconomic figures revealed in 2005, technocratic activity continued in an "ocean of transgression." The fiction and deception had arisen out of a situation of "bureaucratic anarchy," in which an extreme compartmentalization of administrative tasks went hand in hand with circumvention. Nevertheless, processes for formulating economic and financial policies were not completely absent. The interventions of the IMF unintentionally acted to coordinate government activities. The government's admission in 2005 that the figures had been falsified also confirms the existence of a paradoxical technocratic autonomy, functioning in parallel with forms of misappropriation and in their shadow. After 2005, the transition broadly focused on the task of revising elements of the falsified statistics and, while it gained advantage from this at the international level, it was not capable of producing a macroeconomic policy. The administration was not set back on track. It was in tune with a period that remained primarily characterized by instability. The regime that emerged from the democratic elections of 2007 was marked by the staging of a "technocratic event"—the consultative group—that was supposed to set the seal on the return to democracy of a developing Mauritania. It represented a feat on the part of the economic administration and brought the Mauritanian technocratic elite into the limelight. But the coup d'Etat of August 2008 signified the failure of a technocratic enterprise that had fostered a fiction of successful transition and concealed the real issues of power. Lastly, the current period has seen a reconfiguration of administrative processes in which, against the background of a serious degradation of working conditions, the authorities seem to be taking advantage of administrative chaos to use new margins for maneuver and to reinforce the atomized, "rhizomatic" structure of the state. Indeed it is possible to argue that management is becoming informalized.

INDEX OF THE MAIN ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS USED

BCM	Banque centrale de Mauritanie / Central bank of Mauritania
CAS	Country Assistance Strategy
CDMT	Cadre de dépenses à moyen terme
CERDI	Centre d'étude et de recherche sur le développement international at the University of Auvergne
CMAP	Centre mauritanien d'analyse des politiques / Mauritanian centre for policy analysis
CMJD	Conseil militaire pour la justice et la démocratie
CSLP	Cadre stratégique de lutte contre la pauvreté
ENA	Ecole nationale d'administration
ENSAE	Ecole nationale de la statistique et de l'administration économique
EDF	European Development Fund
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Countries
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MAED	Ministère des Affaires économiques et du Développement / Ministry of economic affairs and development
MEMAU	Model of the Mauritanian economy
MTEF	Medium Term Expenditure Framework
ONS	Office national de la statistique / National statistics office
PAGEP	Projet d'appui à la gestion de l'énergie et du pétrole / Project to support the management of energy and oil
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper