Mauritania, which has a population of 2.2 million inhabitants, has got the political and social characteristics which make it an Arab country different from its neighbours such as Algeria and Morocco. In fact, Mauritania can be defined as a mosaic because of its tribal and ethnical divisions. The country is geographically and culturally on the borders of arabised Africans of the North and the Africans of the South. The Arabo-Berber community, which represents the majority of the population, is divided into different tribes. These tribes are further divided into «Bidan», the whites, and «Haratin», the former black-skinned slaves descended from black Africans. The two latter are called «Moors». Besides, the non-Arab group includes the Halpulaaren, the Soninkes, the Wolofs and the Bambaras.

Mokhtar Ould Daddah led the country to independence in 1960, after his party, the «Parti du regroupement mauritanien» (PRM) won all the seats at the legislative elections. In 1964, the president united the PRM and some small parties to form the «Parti du Peuple Mauritanien»
(PPM\(^1\)), which will dominate all the activity sectors. Mokthar ould Daddah, re-elected three times, was overthrown by a military coup in July 1978. Since that date, Mauritania has had a succession of military leaders. Colonel Maamouya ould Taya seized power in December 1984 and is now the president of the Democratic Islamic Republic of Mauritania. This chief of Army and former prime minister, from April 1981 to March 1984, remained the head of state until that latter date.

However, the country was early influenced by the Panarabic movement such as the Baathists or the Nasserists, who were in favour of a pro-Arab state. The African community also decided to organize itself and created the « Forces de libérations africaines de Mauritanie » (FLAM\(^2\)) in order to claim for greater political and social rights. Actually, the Arab and black nationalisms had existed since the independance but they grew under ould Taya’s power. In 1966, 1973 and 1979\(^3\), the Arab orientation of the education system triggered demonstrations and riots. The political opposition was clandestine during that period because of the military government which had banned political parties since 1978. The Baathists and Nasserists were sporadically arrested, put in prison and accused of leading actions against the national interest. The power faced periodic tensions between the two important racial groups. The political actions of the FLAM and a plot unfolded in 1987 made the power react through a wave of arrests and imprisonments of the black activists and the execution of three black officers. Later, the 1989 conflict with Senegal led to mass deportation of black African Mauritanians declared as Senegalese.

Therefore, The « Islamic » Republic of Mauritania engaged into a democratization process in 1991. In fact, the French president Mitterrand’s speech in « La Baule » and the support of Iraq during the Gulf crisis forced Mauritania and its president Mohamed ould Taya to convert the country to democracy. Moreover, Mauritanian economic and social development depends widely on the international financial help. So, the strong degradation of this latter because of the Gulf crisis and the support of ould Taya to Saddam Hussein, constrained the country of change its international relations\(^4\). Democracy was a way of reconciliation with its principal sponsors. But Ould Taya refused the idea of a national conference, like in Benin, demanded by the opposition. He maybe have perceived it as a threat against his own power and

\(^1\) Giovanni Sartori qualified the party-system of this period of « dominant authoritarian » and imposed by force : Giovanni Sartori, Parties and party systems, a framework for analysis, Cambridge University Press, London 1976

\(^2\) African liberation forces of Mauritania

\(^3\) for more information :Marchesin P., Tribus, ethnies et pouvoir en Mauritanie, Karthala, Paris, 1992

impunity. So the «Second Republic» began in Mauritania, when the new constitution submitted to a national referendum was adopted in July 1991. Furthermore, a law authorized political parties and instituted press freedom. The constitution built a powerful presidential system, in which the president is elected for a six year mandate that can be renewed. The president appoints and dismisses the prime minister. The Senate and the Parliament have the legislative prerogative.

Since the democratisation process, the political competition has gone through two phases. The first period can be called the «face to face» between the «Parti Républicain Démocratique et Social» (PRDS) led by the elected president Ould Taya and the main opposition party, coalition of all opponents to the power, the «Union des Forces Démocratiques» (UFD), led by Ahmed Ould Daddah. In spite of Ould Taya’s control over the democratisation process, the civil society tried to emerge and the opposition united in order to achieve the changeover of political power.

The second phase can be called the «predominant party system» period. After the election of Ould Taya as president, the opposition went through a time of disarray. It ended the «face to face» period and benefited the majority party, the PRDS. The break up of the opposition left the PRDS alone. But the latter is made up with numerous factions. These factions compete with one another within the party, instead of standing between political parties. The instability of governments and the numerous reshuffles are in fact a kind of redistribution and political changeover more than the election. Ould Taya uses the tribe to reinforce his position. This way of governing the PRDS is possible because of the economic and political resources being controlled by the state. According to M. Bratton and N. Van de Walle, «big-man democracy is emerging, in which the formal trappings of democracy coexist with neopatrimonial political practice». In this context, the opposition can not really grow. Therefore, the state repression against opposition parties, like the «OUMMA» an Islamic party, the AC or the recent dissolution of the UFD, are the signs of the return of authoritarian measures.

«The development of this new pluralism can not be seen as leading automatically to democratisation and the development of liberal-democratic polyarchal systems. Rather, the latter should be seen as one possible of the process». In this sense, we argue that the

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Mauritanian consolidation process is threatened because of the manipulation of the ethnic and tribal divisions, which is possible thanks to the control of the state resources by Ould Taya. However, become the PRDS the last area of political competition. In addition, we will shed some light on the Mauritanian party system: on one hand we think that the previous regime and the mode of transition had have effects on the prospects for democracy, on the other hand, the persistence of patronage and tribal revival are not good signs for the possibilities of the democratic consolidation in Mauritania.

**The political background: democracy by decree**

In order to understand the working of the political system, and more precisely the party system in Mauritania, we must go back to the transition process, induced in 1991. Before the liberalisation, the Mauritanian political regime could have been described as a military oligarchy, in the sense that there was a leader, Mohamed Ould Taya, but the political decisions were made collectively in the committee, the CMSN (Comité militaire de salut national). Political parties were banned even if an underground political life developed.

Furthermore, the Mauritanian regime belonged to the category of regimes we could define as neo-patrimonial: « in neo-patrimonial regimes, the chief executive maintains authority through personal patronage, rather through ideology or law (…) In contemporary neo-patrimonialism, relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade a formal political and administrative system and leaders occupy bureaucratic offices less to perform public service then to acquire personal wealth and status (…), the essence of neo-patrimonialism is the award by public officials of personal favors, both within the state (notably sector jobs) and his society (for instance, licenses, contracts and projects…) »

We argue that the nature of the Mauritanian regime has shaped the transition and also the functioning of the party system. The power used clientelism to regulate the system and maintain its influence on the society. As a result, we think that the democratisation process has not changed this way of ruling. From a military oligarchy power based on neo-patrimonialism, the regime has gone to a predominant party system using the same way of governing. The elite has not been renewed or the emerging one has been coopted by the party. Besides, the power act to discredit the opposition, seen as a factor of the division. Its leaders are also described as politicians, who only think about their own interests. However, the support to Iraq during the Gulf crisis, the 1989-1990 Senegalo-Mauritanian conflict and popular protest, which began with demonstrations by groups of women demanding
information on relatives who had « disappeared » forced Ould Taya to « open » the country. The power began to organize local elections in 1986 but with a one-list system. In 1990 it decided to authorize four lists per district. Yet, the authority banned all the lists considered dangerous for the country and backed by ethnical or tribal interests. The supporters of pluralism were disappointed and the participation rate only averaged 25 or 30 %. After the elections, opponents to the regime sent a letter to the president demanding for a real democracy. The power experienced a period of tensions due to popular protest which accelerated the transition process.

Ould Taya rejected a National Conference and took all initiative in doing political reform. In this way the opposition has had no latitude to influence the regime. Because of the nature of the regime, the civil society was underdeveloped, and can not really influence the head of state.

After the adoption of the new constitution, the first pluralist elections were organised. The political parties tried to organise their campaign despite their lack of democratic experience. But we argue that the political background and the nature of the political transition have shaped the future success of the « democracy ». The first elections and the « face to face » between the power party and the opposition will last only for one election. We are witnessing the establishment of a predominant party system.

The emergence of a political opposition and the few time hope of the alternance

Before the constitutional reforms, some amongst the state elite decided to join the emerging opposition. In this context, Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, leader of the Haratin movement, « El Hor » and former minister quit the power-side and the « Mouvement National Démocratique » (MND), joined the opposition with other former opponents and in June 1991 founded (before the authorization of political parties) the FDUC, « Front Démocratique Uni pour le Changement », demanding for a national conference. The power’s reaction was to arrest the leaders.

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7 Michael Bratton, Nicolas Van de Walle, op.cit., p 102
8 The constitution was submitted to a national referendum. The official statistics gave a turnout rate, which reached 85, 34% and a massive approbation of the constitution with 97, 94%, which is dubious
9 Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, the haratin movement el hor leader, Hadrami Ould Khattri and Amadou Mamadou Diop, former minister of Mohammed Ould Daddah, Mustapha Ould Bedredine and Ladji Traoré, MND leaders, Bechir el Hassen and Dah ould Yassa, independant democrats, were under arrest.
After an amnesty and a law which authorized political parties, the FDUC became the Union des Forces Démocratiques with Hadrami ould Khattri as president of the national council and Messaoud Ould Boukheir as Secretary General. Their political program claimed for a revising of the electoral register and the electoral code. This party was a coalition of the black-African and Moor opponents in spite of the 1989-1990 ethnic conflict. Ould Taya created the Parti Républicain Démocrate et Social, the PRDS, the 28 August, which gathered conservatives like Islamists and Baathists. But the characteristic of the party is the role played by the notabilities, tribal chiefs and businessmen: « political parties were often little more than collections of notables held together by clientelism and the promise of access to state resources », and « parties were differenctiated less by ideology or programmatic concerns than by narrow interests of clientelis networks, typically organized around an individual ».

Other political parties close to the PRDS were formed, for instance the « Rassemblement Démocratique pour l’Unité » (RDU), led by Ahmed Ould Sidi Baba, the mayor of Atar and tribe’s chief of the Smassid, the tribe of Ould Taya.

Besides, the Parti Mauritanien du Renouveau, led by Moulaye El Hassan Ould Jeyid, former mayor of Zouerate joined a coordination of opposition parties. « L’Union Populaire Socialiste et Démocratique » (UPSD) created by Mohamed Mahmoud ould Mah, was considered to be near the nationalist Arab trend. « L’Alliance Populaire pour le Progrès » (APP) claimed for a radical arabism. The « Parti du Centre Démocratique de Mauritanie » (PDCM) led by Bamba ould Sidi Baba tried to propose a third option, other than the PRDS and the UFD. A small party, the « Parti de la Liberté, de l’Égalité et de la Justice » (PLEJ) was the last one to be created by a black-African, Ba Mamadou Alassane.

Soon after, Mohammed ould Taya announced the forthcoming elections. First, there were the presidential elections in January 1992, then the legislative elections in March and finally the Senate was elected in April. The power did not give a chance to the opposition and manipulated the democratization process for its own end. The opposition had not enough time to organize itself and decide on a viable program. This « Guided Democratisation » led by the ruling elite is a well-known scenario.

In December, Ahmed Ould Daddah, brother of the former president Mohamed Ould Daddah, decided to stand at the presidential elections in January 1992 as a UFD candidate. It generated
personal and ideological conflicts within the party. Finally, his candidature was approved in order to end the risk of explosion within the movement.

The presidential elections were held on 24 January 1992. Ould Taya won the first ballot with 63% of the votes. Ahmed Ould Daddah obtained 33%. The two other candidates, Moustapha Ould Mohamed Saleck and Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Mah, shared the remaining 4%. The opposition denounced fraud and the use of economic and political resources by the state. In fact, the PRDS was accused of clientelism. The tribe was coming back in force and the democratization process renewed the communautarist logics.

After the election of Ould Taya, the UFD, then renamed UFD-Ere nouvelle (new era), decided to boycott the legislative elections. So, the elections for the 79 seats of the National Assembly were held in March 1992 and ensured the near-monopoly of the president’s party, the PRDS, even if the latter had to fight for every district because of the independant candidatures. The PRDS obtained 67 seats and the independants 10. The RDU and the PRM respectively had one deputy. The same scenario happened for the upper-house elections. The PRDS won 35 of the 56 seats.

**The opposition disarray**
The only common denominator of the UFD was the common adversary, Ould Taya. But with his election, the opposition went through a crisis in relation to the strategy to adopt. This party was composed of numerous factions. The most important ones were the MND, a former marxist and clandestine party, El Hor, the Haratin movement, the Mouvement des Démocrates Indépendants, the black African nationalists of the « Alliance pour une Mauritanie Nouvelle » (AMN), and the centrist group. As John A Wiseman wrote « in most cases the absence of pluralism was largely illusory. Behind the monolithic façade lay a political life which was notable for high levels of division, factionalism and intense, violent rivalry »13. This is particularly the case of Mauritania, where the clandestine political life was very strong under the military oligarchy. The opposition was confronted with personal rivalry and former ideological differences, which emerged after the presidential election. The unflexible decision to boycott the legislative elections met a rising discontent amongst the party and the supporters.

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12 Some members of the AMN are former militants of the FLAM. After the state repression of the clandestine movement in the eighties, the leaders decided live Mauritania and continued their fight in exile. Some of them prefered to stay and fight in the country.

13 John A Wiseman, op.cit., p 440
Some influential members, former statesmen like minister under Mohamed Ould Daddah, quit the party to found a new one. The source of disagreement between the UFD-en and the « centrists », which decided to go away, was the recognition of the regime. Ahmed Ould Daddad refused to recognize the new regime and its legitimacy. In reaction, Mohamed Ould Babah and Hamdi Ould Mouknass created a new party: the Union Pour le Progrès et la démocratie (UPD), recognised in June 1993. The party presented itself as a centrist party.

The UFD-en confronted a second wave of mass defection riched. El Hor, led by Messaoud Boulkheir kept distance and the MDI, a movement of young intellectual Moors asking for a laïc state and a liberalisation too. Some of the latter movement will join the ruling-PRDS. The opposition seemed to be unable to promote the claims of its members and the leaving of Messaoud Ould Boulkheir has generated big change. He considered that the Haratins were less represented in the party than the Black-Africans and that the boycott was not the good strategy. In this context, the leader of the UFD decided to take part in the local elections held on 31st January and 4th February 1994. The party said it would « struggle within the limits of possibilities offered by the constitution » and called on the opposition to elaborate a common platform. But after the mass defection, Ahmed Ould Daddah had to face the problem of his legitimacy. The party lost almost all the Black-African and Haratin supporters. To many black-africans, Ahmed Ould Daddah appeared as the only alternative to Ould Taya for the first elections. But after the 1992 failure, they decided to change their political strategy. So the PRDS took 163 out of the 197 districts fought for in the first round of the local elections on the 31st January, and won 11 out of the contested district in the second round. But the PRDS lost Kaëdi, an important town of the Brakna region, to the benefit of the UFD.

The reinforced domination of the PRDS

The democratic transition process has affected the possible consolidation of democracy in Mauritania. This « guided democracy » left all the control in the hands of the current president and his party, the PRDS. The character of the previous regime and the mode of transition have effects on the consolidation process. In the case of Mauritania, the « managed democratisation » was not decided by « authentic » democrats. So the role of the elite became very important in the analysis of the consolidation possibilities. The Mauritanian democratisation process was analysed as a « flawed transition »14 in the sense that the elections were not fair and free and that these dubious elections returned the incumbents.

14 Michael Bratton, Nicolas Van de Walle, op.cit., p 121
In this context, a 25% rise in the price of bread in 1995 triggered popular demonstrations called the « bread riots » in January. The opposition took this opportunity to mobilise the opinion against the government. The troubles were linked to the IMF’s economic reform policies begun in 1992. The state imposed a night-time curfew and arrested the leaders of the opposition parties like Ahmed ould Daddah (UFD), Hamdi ould Mouknass (UDP), whose speeches denounced the « nepotist management of state resources ».

The second legislative elections held in October 1996 and confirmed the domination of the PRDS, even if, this time the opposition parties decided to take part after their boycott in 1992. But, as far as the elections were concerned, the opposition did not find a consensus concerning common candidates and were weakened. 13 political parties and 50 independent lists were presented for these elections. In fact, the opposition was more fragmented with the early creation of a new party, Action pour le Changement (AC), led by Messaoud ould Boulkheir. This party emerged after a dissidence in the UFD-en. The division between the black communities and the Moors re-appeared within the party, when the leader did not succeed in finding a compromise on the leadership places of the party. A « crisis committee » was found in order to find a new coalition between the Haratins of El Hor and the Black-African, even if the leaving of Messaoud Ould Boulkheir was linked to the too big political weight of Black African in the leadership of the party. They left the UFD and founded the AC in August 1995. The departure of the Haratins was a turning point because Haratins, normally considered as Moors became a third force and an electoral stake. The emergence of a Haratin Identity, different from the « Bidans » and declaring the original africanity of the Haratins, can be seen as a new political strategy of a group which reinforces its electoral weight.

But in June, president Ould Taya toured the country and visited the Senegal valley river, normally voting for the opposition in 1992. After the 1989 conflict and mass deportation of Mauritanian Black-African in Senegal, his campaign for the « national reconciliation » allowed a rallying of Black-African notabilities. In fact, with the failure of the opposition, some members of the Black-African community decided to integrate the ruling PRDS, which was the only way to access the state resources. We can observe numerous strategies such as the Peul initiative to create an association claiming for the arabic origin of the Peuls. This strategy succeeded and was rewarded by the nomination to the trade and tourism minister of Abou Demba Sow. The reshuffiling is actually one of the characteristics of the neo-patrimonial logic. This Peul strategy of cultural assimilation was critized by the FLAM and considered an attempt to break the Black-African solidarity. But the first Black-African
members of the PRDS, called « Zoulou » succeeded in rallying a lot of political leaders from the South.

The numerous new arrivals in the PRDS increased the conflicts within the party, where tribal logics and factions now expressed themselves. The conflicts are less established between the different parties than inside the dominant party. In this context, conflicts between factions regarding the access to key positions in the party are frequent.

The legislative elections confirmed the majority of the PRDS in the national assembly. The UFD boycotted the second round because of frauds. Only the AC won a seat which returned to Kebe Abdoulaye\textsuperscript{15}, candidate in the Sabkha district of Nouakchott. The PRDS won 70 out of the 79 seats. 7 seats were won by independants and one by the RDU, close to the PRDS. The victory of the PRDS has to be moderated because of the weak turnout rate: only 30\% in Nouakchott and 60\% of the 1.021.828 registered voters in the country. After the elections, the prime Minister resigned but was renewed in his functions. But, the government was reshuffled: six ministers left.

**Ould Taya’s system: the decline of democracy**

In Spite of the conflict within the PRDS and the attempt by the opposition to unite once again, Ould Taya’s power was not under real threat. On the contrary, he was re-elected president on 12 December 1997.

In order to prepare the presidential elections, the opposition signed a common platform in March 1997, which created the « Front Uni de l’Opposition ». This opposition front included the UFD, the AC, two parties which left the majority: the Alliance Populaire Progressiste (APP), a nasserist party and Attalia, a Baathist formation. Besides, a party created after a dissidence in the UDP of Hamdi Ould Mouknass and led by Mohamed Ould Baba, joined the FUO too. The demands of this coordination were linked to democratic measures such as the creation of an independant electoral commission, the adoption of a consensual electoral code, a revision of the electoral registration, the fight against slavery and the establishment of a real pluralist democracy. Furthermore, the charter implied the return of refugees with guarantees.

In this context, the nomination of Abou Demba Sow to the post of foreign affairs office minister in June 1997 by ould Taya could be considered a sign to the Black- African community\textsuperscript{16}.

\textsuperscript{15}The AC’s candidate count 27\% of the voters in the first round against 30\% for the PRDS, BQA, 18/10/96

\textsuperscript{16}The nomination of a black-african member to the foreign affairs office has not be seen since 1966, when M.Ould Daddah appointed Wane Birane Mamadou to this post.
But the demands of the opposition front meant that there was no consensus about rules and codes, which are the preliminary for democracy. If we follow the theory which considered that the political culture circulates from the top to the bottom, from the elite to the mass, the Mauritanian case seems to be blocked. The lack of elite convergence about the regime, « sets of political procedures – sometimes called the « rules of the political game »- that determine the distribution of power »\(^\text{17}\), shows that the consolidation of the democracy is currently not possible.

Besides, the use of repression and authoritarian measures against the opposition were the evidence of the hardening of the regime. In January 1997, Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, leader of the AC, Mohamed Ould Hafed Ould Ismaël, Secretary General of the APP and members of the movement were arrested and charged with having clandestine links with Lybia. In addition, demonstrations of teacher trade-unions were also repressed and considered a Nasserist initiative by the state and the freedom of the press was confronted with censorship. In order to denounce the confiscation of civil and political rights, the opposition front organised demonstrations in April 1997.

Moreover, the president faced conflict in his own party. The Nasserists of the « historic trend » critized the nepotism and the corruption. Ould Taya reacted with the dismissal of the Justice minister, Mohamed Lemine Salem ould Dah, and of numerous prefects, superintendants and officers. Four important Nasserists members of the PRDS resigned. They represented a big tribal clientele in the east of the country ( Assaba and the two Hodhs). If the opposition had not decided to boycott the presidential elections, a possible union with the Nasserists could have been an obstacle for Ould Taya.

So the presidential elections were held on 12 December 1997 without real hope. Ould Taya benefited of Hamdi Ould Mouknass’s rally, leader of the UDP. Besides, members of the AC and The UFD south-east region coordination decided to vote in favour of the outgoing president Ould Taya. The four remaining candidates were easily beaten. Ch’Bih Ould Cheikh Malainine, former minister and spiritual guide of the quadriya brotherhood and from the presidential trend obtained 6,97% of the votes. Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Mah, leader of the « Union Socialiste Progressiste et Démocratique » (USPD) and Moulaye oud Jeyed, the older Zouerat mayor and leader of a little party, the « Parti Mauritanien pour le Renouveau et la Concorde » did not exceed 1%. Besides, Kane Amadou Moktar put himself forward as a Black African candidate. But the Parti de la Liberté, de l’Egalité et de la Justice (PLEJ),

\(^{17}\) Michael Bratton, Nicolas Van de Walle, op.cit., p 9
which supported him in the beginning decided to stop its support. The opposition parties considered this candidature a democratic guarantee organized by the state.

Then Ould Taya was re-elected with 90.25% of the votes. This plebiscite was widely denounced by the official opposition and the dissidents in exile. The ballot rigging and the political bribery ensured the return to office of the incumbents. The 74.72% turnout rate was judged as false by the opposition. Cheikh El Avia Ould Mohamed Khouna was replaced as prime minister by Mohamed Lemine Ould Guig. Hamdi Ould Mouknass, leader of the UDP, who rallied the President before the elections was thanked and appointed Minister councillor of the presidency.

According to Huntington, a democratic regime is considered consolidated after two electoral turnovers: when « the party or group that takes power in the initial election at the time of the transition loses a subsequent election and turnover power to those election winners, and if those election winners then peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later election. »

The continuing fragmentation of the opposition and the pre-dominant partysystem
The opposition continued to be divided and the fragile equilibrium inside the UFD was broken off. The last main movement, the MND, broke away from the UFD-en. The leader of the MND disagreed about the arrival of Nasserists, which left the PRDS, within the party. The latter are considered the political actors of the repression of the Black-African communities in 1989. In fact, they had keyposition during the repression and were able to influence the state. So the dissidence of Mohamed El Moustapha Ould Bedredine, leader of the MND, was resulted from the lack of democracy within the party. He considered that decisions were made without preliminary dialogue between the different components. In this context, the MND left the UFD-en and decided to keep the name of the party in order to claim its legitimacy. Two parties have now got the same name and Mauritanians call them the UFD-A and the UFD-B. This is symptomatic of the opposition’s failure to overcome its internal conflicts. In consequence the opposition is completely discredited in the eyes of Mauritanians. The gradually fragmented opposition did not offer a real alternative.

Furthermore, the former opposition coalition, which united against Ould Taya, could not resist the establishment of the PRDS monopoly. All these conflicts benefited the ruling party. The current party system in Mauritania has actually got all the characteristics of a

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18 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the late Twentieth Century*, University of Oklaoma Press, 1991, p 267
« predominant party system » according to the classification of G.Sartori\textsuperscript{19}, in the sense that it « is a power configuration in which one party governs alone, without being subjected to alternation, as long as it continues to win, electorally, an absolute majority»\textsuperscript{20}. Of course we can doubt the fact that elections are fair and really free in Mauritania. But we argue that if we have this configuration, it is the result of the way political parties are working. The guided transition left the all chances to the PRDS, which is well established in the country because of tribal supports and redistribution politics. The Mauritanian party system is a consequence of neo-patrimonialism, which conducts political behaviours. The Mauritanian regime is not really democratic but we are in the context of party pluralism. We do not want to classify Mauritania as a country with an « hegemonic party system » because, in a sense, political elections are contested in spite of the sporadic repression of the opposition. Mauritanian opposition parties are not just « satellite » parties. For G.Sartori « all parties have equally of opportunities », « but equal opportunities are not the same as equal resources »\textsuperscript{21}. Thus, the control of state resources by the PRDS reinforces its position. Opponents have compared the PPM-state with the PRDS-state\textsuperscript{22} which can be summarized in the campaign slogan of Ould Taya during the first presidential elections in 1992: « change with stability ». Tribalism existed under the presidency of Mohamed ould Daddah but it was less visible. With the dissolution of the Parti du Peuple Mauritanien and of the National Assembly in 1978, tribalism cannot express itself anymore through the institutions and was directly present in the state-area. According to Philippe Marchesin tribal demands grew under the military oligarchy. Between 1959 and 1978, 23 tribes shared power. But, between 1978 and 1986, the number of tribes accessing to power increased to 32\textsuperscript{23}. It seems that the democratic opening did not really change the political equilibrium. In fact, Ould Taya has reactivated the « Systèmes d’Education de masses » (SEM) since the democratisation. These mass education systems were established under the regime of Ould Haïdallah in 1982. The official aim of these structures was to educate the population, inculcate a civic sense in the mass, help people to choose their political representatives and relay policy initiatives. In fact, it played a role of political frame. The SEM were found at all government levels down to the district. Furthermore, department region and national level were also represented. At the national

\textsuperscript{19} Giovanni Sartori, \textit{Parties and party systems, a framework for analysis}, Cambridge University Press, London, 1976
\textsuperscript{20} Giovanni Sartori, \textit{ibid}, p 127
\textsuperscript{21} Giovanni Sartori, \textit{ibid}, p 200
level, this pyramidal organisation consisted of four secretaries such as the culture the organisation. One of the first aim attributed to the SEM was the fight against tribalism. In reality, the SEM, like the former PPM of Moktar Ould Daddah, suffered a lack of mass participation. But if the SEM did not get the population’s support, they would be a good instrument to spy and control people, and to consolidate the head-state power: administrative authorities were the real actors of the SEM and actually relayed the central power. Moreover, these structures have allowed the return of tribalism. For example, the distribution of food help through these structures was essentially based on tribalism. In addition, the central power controled the local level, which did not attain the autonomy.

The tribal revival
A problem « lies in the danger of attributing too much importance to the elections in prediction of future developments in the democratisation process » In fact, the elections can explain the political behaviour of Mauritanians and the working of African political parties: political parties in Mauritania are coalitions of interests without real programs. People would vote more for a personality than a party, and rather for things they can obtain from the personality. « The real institutions of polititics in Africa are the informal relations of loyalty and patronage established between « big men » and the personal followers ». But we argue that neo-patrimonialism does exist thanks to public institutions that the « big men » invested with his own logics. Neo-patrimonialism is a mixture of bureaucratic norms and patrimonialist behaviour. In this context, the tribal solidarities or conflict have played an important role and tribal identity experienced a revival with the establishment of pluralism. In this case, the president’s party was in better place to take advantage of this situation. Even if the elections are not really free and fair, the irregularities of the poll can not alone explain the domination of ould Taya and the ruling PRDS.

For example, the use of public resources and the administration during the electoral campaign was denounced by the independant press. Moreover, the PRDS used the traditional hierarchy to establish its power: the rallying of tribal chiefs is ensured thanks to

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23 Marchesin P. op.cit, p 207
26 John A Wiseman, op.cit., p 444
27 Michael Bratton, Nicolas Van de Walle, op.cit., p 44
28 Medard Jean-François, Etats d’Afrique noire, formations, mécanismes et crise, Karthala, 1991
compensation in return such as the allocation of minister, region (wilaya), representative seats, or food help. It explains the later rallying of opposition notabilities, who had to guarantee the future of their tribes or ethic group if they wanted to keep their position. For example, notabilities, who did not integrate the PRDS, had some difficulties to obtain credits for farmers and employment and in fact, when an opposition mayor is elected, the state - through governors and prefects- controlled the social and economic life.

The PRDS became a strong and very heterogeneous party because of the numerous trends and factions. The latter have then been fighting to seize power. The consequences are a splitting up of the political life due to the impoverishment of the population. But this situation could be dangerous for ould Taya: the increased weight of tribal and local notabilities made them the only middlemen between state and population. In this context, the power elaborated a new political strategy. During the 1996 legislative elections, it tried to support - where it was ensured that the PRDS would win- new candidates, often from modest origin, against the traditional notabilities. Of course, in the South, where the opposition could have won, the state relied on the support of traditional notabilities. But in reaction, the notabilities of the PRDS removed, took the initiative to create « independant lists ». This phenomenon is not rare: it is a way of saying they are unhappy to have been removed and to show they can mobilise a big clientele and become indispensable to the party. They generally rallied the PRDS after the elections. According to Alain Antil, the failure of democracy is linked to the fact that Mauritania is a « holistic » society, where the vote is not individual but collective and we can see that the tribal vote emptied the democratical institutions of their sense. According to Mariella Villasante-de Beauvais, there is a « tribal democracy » because of the coexistence of new and traditional institutions. The author explains that, more than in a ethnical or tribal frame, the democratisation organised in the context of factionalism. Tribes (qaba’il) or ethnies do not rally a party in a homogeneous way but it depends on their own factional divisions. Besides, the political legitimacy of a personality is closely linked with

33 Antil Alain, op.cit.,1997, pp 124-131
34 Antil Alain, op.cit.,1998, pp 185-193
his genealogic legitimacy. The qabila or tribe, which is the base of the Mauritanian Moor organisation, is composed of members with the same status and consisted of a hierarchy of groups depending on their status and their order of genealogical insertion. In this context, alliances are decided to defend political, economic or religious interests. These kind of alliances are called «ehmiyyât» and constitute a faction. Politic and kinship play an important role in the organisation of these groups\(^{36}\) and have effects on the vote organisation. Moreover, the PRDS used the spiritual weight of the brotherhood’s chiefs (Tijanyya or Qadriya), which is well developed in Mauritania. When villages under their influence vote for the PRDS, the brotherhood’s chiefs receive privileges in return\(^{37}\). According to Rahal Boubrik, the spiritual chiefs can play the role of middlemen between the political parties and their own tribes. Since the democratisation, Ould Taya has stayed at the head-state and controlled all the resources. His own tribe, the Smassid, a maraboutiq tribe from the north of Mauritania, benefitted above all from his supreme position. This tribe was described as «the most powerful financial cartel of the country»\(^{38}\), which dominated all the economic sectors. It is one of the characteristics of the neo-patrimonial rule which «tends toward particularistic networks of personal loyalty that grant undue favor to selected kinship or subnational groups»\(^{39}\).

Moreover, the state elite can take control of production and distribution in a wide range of sectors. In this context, the numerous turnovers of the office holders and reshuffles in the different governments are understandable as a way to redistribute and keep a clientele. This re-distribution is made according to a proper tribal quota. This «political nomadism»\(^{40}\) is symptomatic of a neo-patrimonialist regime and illustrates what is called «the politic of the belly»\(^{41}\). So the predominant position of the PRDS is linked to this way of working. Ould Taya «manages the political class by circulation of office holders»\(^{42}\). In February 2001, the newspaper «l’Eveil-hebdo» spoke of «shuffle-mania» concerning the cabinet and wrote that «the cabinet shuffle somewhat appears as a re-balancing of the regional distribution of power


\(^{38}\) « du rififi chez les S », Ibrahima N’Diaye, journal La Tortue, n°3, Nouakchott, the 29 march 1992

\(^{39}\) Michael Bratton, Nicolas Van de Walle, Democratic, op.cit., p 83

\(^{40}\) Marchesin P., op.cit., 1992


\(^{42}\) Michael Bratton, Nicolas Van de Walle, op.cit., 1997, p 76
in view of the upcoming municipal and legislative elections ». It has been the third reshuffle since January 2000.

**Civil Society, National Identity and democracy**

The democratic consolidation depends on the emergence of a strong civil society and the emergence of a democratic political culture, which is a key factor in the consolidation of a democracy. Civil society is « viewed as a set of social organisations, outside the state, which could be used underpin an effective democratic order. the characteristic institutions of civil society (…) are the trade-unions, professional associations, the independant media and other information sources, and other social and economic groupings which help to integrate different sections of the community with one another » 43. In that context, we considered that the opening of the regime enabled the emergence of a press, which has understood the rules of democracy. In spite of the obstacles, and the censorship, the press plays now an important role. For example, during the elections, the press did note all the irregularities of poll, the use of administration and state resources by the PRDS and critized the tribal behaviour within the party 44. But the reading of newspapers is a Nouakchott occupation and newspaper like the « Calame » or the « tribune », french-language newspapers are often ceased or censured. Besides, illiteracy is widespread in Mauritania. According to the 1988 demographic survey, the literacy rate did not exceed 38% of the population. The elimination of illiteracy is essential before trying to inculcate notions of citizenship and the consolidation of democracy requires the widespread adoption of democratic values trough education.

Moreover the Black-African and Moorish communities are organised into a social hierarchy, which is very strong. For example, the Haratins are often considered slaves and therefore have difficulties to hold political key positions. The socio-economic characteristics and differences of the population prevail over equality. In addition, « societies divided by clearly define and historically antagonistic cultural groups will have difficulty in sustaining democracy » 45. A part of the Black-African community, especially the Halpulaaren, do not recognize the current regime. For example, the Forces de Libération Africaines de Mauritanie (FLAM), claim to represent the interests of the Black Africans who are victims of racial discrimination. This liberation movement was created in 1983 after the surge of different little nationalist groups.

After the publication of « le manifeste du négro-mauritanien opprimé » in 1986, and a plot unfolded in 1987, the power reacted violently. Members of the movement exiled to Senegal or France and are still potent. Besides, the conflict between Senegal and Mauritania in 1989 triggered a mass deportation of Mauritanian Black African to Senegal. Some of the latter are still refugees in the Senegal river valley, in Europe and in United-States. This movement claims for a democracy within a federal form of governmnmt, which seems to be the most appropriate political system for the cultural diversity.

Moreover, the diaspora counts a lot of opponents in exile. They are numerous associations or political groups such as the FLAM or SOS-esclave, the Front Arabo-Africain du Salut, which are the most important organisations. They try to influence the internal political scene in Mauritania. Therefore, the regime of Nouakchott must face this external opposition, which challenges its international legitimacy and discredits the system by denouncing nepotism, corruption, clientelism and repression. Furthermore, the use of new technology like the internet and the increasing links with western political parties or strong lobbies enhance their political weight.

**Latest political developments**

The senatorial elections held in April 2000, regarding the renewal of one third of the 54 seats, resulted in no surprise. The opposition boycotted the elections, except Tidiane Koïta, senator of Kaëdi and former member of the AC, which he left before creating his new party, the Union Nationale pour la Démocratie et le Développement (UNDD). In fact, the AC has experienced a strong crisis, since the departure of Black Africans led by the only opposition deputy, Kebe Abdoulaye. The latter created a new party « l’Alliance pour la Justice et la Démocratie », which confirms the increasing fragmentation of the opposition. In this context, the PRDS won 13 seats and two went to the independants.

The state-power seemed to encourage participation of the opposition to the next legislative elections in October 2001. Ould Taya took the initiative and invited the former president of Mauritania, Moktar ould Daddah, in exile in France, to come back. The latter asked first of all the establishment of a transitional council to organise democratic and transparent elections and asked ould Taya not to stand again at the next presidential elections in December 2003. Furthermore, small administrative measures were taken, following pressure by the opposition as conditions for its participation to the elections. The Opposition Front has not made its

decision but the management of the elections and the registration of voters by the interior minister and other government agencies is considered an obstacle to the establishment of a true democracy. The numerous demonstrations organised by the opposition in order to call for more political reforms led to the repression by the state. Ahmed Ould Daddah was arrested. A lot of complaints from opposition leaders and street violence incited the state to release the UFD-en leader. But the continuing demonstrations in favour of political reforms and the UFD-en leader role of this movement have led to the dissolution of the party by government decree for « instigating violence » and « action to undermine the country’s interests » in October 2000. Authoritarian measures taken by the state are not a good sign for democracy, which is very fragile.

Mauritanian democracy is not really established. According to M. Bratton and N. Van de Walle, « if clientelist practices continue to dominate politics and if political elites are wedded to democracy only insofar as it enhances their power and influence, it is difficult to imagine much progress in the institutionalization and legitimation of democracy » 46. Of course, the liberalisation has allowed some changes. For example, popular protest now expressed easier in spite of the sporadic repression and harrassment of the press. But Ould Taya seems to be anxious about his own power. On the one hand, the managed democratisation process ensured him sponsors and international legitimacy, but on the other hand, he began a process, which is now beyond his control. The latest authoritarian measures seem to show his attempt to restore his unshared power.

Finally, one can not speak of the failure of the « imported » democracy. On the contrary, democratic institutions are invested by traditional logic and tribal revival. Mariella Villasante-de Beauvais speaks of « tribal democracy ». The real difficulty of the establishment of a consolidated democracy in Mauritania is linked to neo-patrimonialism and its consequences on the party system. The ruling PRDS is a monster and ould Taya can not always control his creature: for example, mass fraud during elections is often the fact of local notabilities who do without national agreement ballot box stuffing. It explains the incredible election returns of some regions, where the PRDS candidates won with 99.89% of votes! In conclusion, if Mauritania is a democracy, it is a neo-patrimonialist one.

46 M. Bratton and N. Van de Walle, op.cit., p 235