The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is the only West African country that is not a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) because it withdrew its membership in 2000. In both 2005 and 2008, successful coups overturned constitutional order in the Republic, the only West African country to have more than one coup. It is also one of only two countries in the region from 2000 to 2009 to have a sitting leader removed from power by a coup. With the exception of Guinea, whose leader died in office, it is the only country to have sustained military governance for more than a year during the decade, and the only country to have more than two years of military rule during this time period. This chapter looks at the coups of 2005 and 2008 to determine if there are noticeable differences in the process of intervention as compared with the cases of São Tômé and Príncipe in 2003 and Togo in 2005. Of the three cases, Mauritania is the only one without membership in an active subregional organization in Africa.

Background

Mauritania comprises just over 1 million square kilometers of land, bordered by Senegal to the south, Mali to the south and west, and Algeria and Western Sahara (a Moroccan-held territory) to the north (see EIU 1986, Pazzanita 1996: 1–10, 2008: 1–20, Webb 1992: xi–xvi). The country also has over 750 kilometers of Atlantic coastline to the west. There are just over 3.1 million people in Mauritania—roughly half the population of Togo—most living in southern towns bordering Senegal and Mali. The ethnic makeup of Mauritania includes Arab-Berber Moors, Black Moors, and Black Africans. Roughly 40 percent of the people are Black Moors,
30 percent Black Africans, and 30 percent Arab-Berber Moors. White Moors are said to be a mixed race between Berbers and Arabs, while Black Moors are largely Black Africans that descended from the slaves of Berbers and therefore identify with their culture. Historically, the territory known today as Mauritania was dominated by the Bafour, a Black African people. Through centuries of desertification, the Bafour who relied on hunting and fishing for subsistence moved south. Berbers from North Africa also began to move into the territory, trading with African kingdoms to the south. The prosperity of their trade allowed them to establish a loosely confederated state that was eventually swallowed up by the Almoravid Empire, which spanned across the Maghreb into southern Spain, and almost as far south as the Senegal River. After facing Spanish defeat, the Almoravid rule began to decline everywhere except Mauritania. Maqil Arab invaders eventually conquered the territory, setting up a rigid hierarchy among the people of Mauritania with Arabs at the top, mixed Arab-Berbers or Moors below them, and the Black African population sequestered from the top. Mauritania remained relatively untouched by European colonial expansion, although France had won rights to the territory in the Treaty of Paris in 1814. After 1900 a French official, General Henri Gouraud, launched a military assault from Senegal to successfully capture the territory. Once France had secured Mauritania, little was done to develop the territory. It became one of the most neglected outposts in French colonial Africa, changing little from the Middle Ages—except that French rule put an end to the practice of raids between rival groups.

As a result of increased international pressure after the Second World War, coming especially from the United States, France began to move its colonial territories toward independence. Moktar Ould Daddah, the only lawyer in Mauritania at the time, led the Union Progressiste Mauritanienne (Mauritanian Progressive Union) (UPM) to win Mauritania’s seat to the French National Assembly in 1951, and swept the newly formed Territorial Assembly of Mauritania, winning 33 of the 34 seats in 1957. On November 28, 1960, Mauritania became the world’s first Islamic republic under the leadership of President Ould Daddah. Shortly after securing independence, the ruling party of President Ould Daddah was merged with small parties into the Parti du Peuple Mauritanien (Mauritanian People’s Party) (PPM). Through the Congress of Unity in October 1961, Mauritania became a one-party state with the PPM as the only legal political group under the leadership of Ould Daddah. Until 1970, Morocco refused to recognize Mauritania, leaving its neighbors to the south as the primary regional allies. In the mid-1960s President Ould Daddah began a policy of Arabization, introducing Arab language and culture into Mauritania and building closer ties with the Arab League. After formally recognizing Mauritania, Arab