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SUBJECT: THE RISE OF THE OULED BISBAA

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Classified By: Ambassador Mark M. Boulware for Reasons 1.4 (b and d)  
[¶](#)1. (SBU) Summary: It is extremely difficult for Westerners to gain an understanding of the complex and opaque world of Mauritanian tribes. Mauritanians tend to be tight lipped about tribal issues and rarely unveil tribal details or the dynamics of tribal politics. The Ouled Bisbaa, a traditionally minor influence in the Mauritanian tribal landscape, has been increasingly gaining riches and power in recent years. General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall Eleya, first cousins and Ouled Bisbaa tribesmen, have played an active and influential role in Mauritanian military, political, and economic life since [¶](#)2005. They have been at the heart of palace intrigues, power and business schemes, military coups, junta-led governments and political manipulations of all sorts. This cable provides background information on a tribe that is poised to consolidate its power over larger, more traditional tribes through the July 18 election. End summary.

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WHO ARE THE OULED BISBAA?  
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[¶](#)2. (SBU) The Ouled Bisbaa are descendants of Arab warriors "berberized" in the South of Morocco. The tribe originated in Morocco and spread through what is now Mauritania and down to the Senegal river valley. Before French colonial times, the Ouled Bisbaa carved themselves a reputation among Moor tribes for being "professional"

and very fierce looters. Popular lore says that other Moor tribes feared and despised them. In the 19th century, Ouled Bisbaa allied with the French colonial powers and played an active role in Mauritania's "pacification." During the French colony, many established themselves in the Senegal river area and controlled commerce along the West African coast.

¶3. (SBU) Today, among Mauritanian tribes, the Ouled Bisbaa enjoy a solid reputation for being skilled businessmen. Nevertheless, according to a Mauritanian tribal elder, traditionally the Ouled Bisbaa have never been considered an influential tribe -- a "big tent" tribe in local parlance. In Mauritania's traditional tribal world, prestige is based in intellectual/religious knowledge and wisdom and Ouled Bisbaa tribesmen have a reputation for not cultivating those prized qualities. A few of them are reputed intellectuals, including former minister of Foreign Affairs Abdallahi Ould Benhmeida and other poets and judges such as the Leaweissi, Ghadoury, and the Moctar Hassen but they are a minority.

¶4. (SBU) The perception among many Moors is that the Mauritanian Ouled Bisbaa are not really a tribe but an "interest group." "The real tribe is located in Morocco," they say. Many Moors view the Ouled Bisbaa as a tribe without solid roots in Mauritania, closer to its Moroccan origins or to Senegal. The Mauritanian Ouled Bisbaa, although spread all over the country and in Senegal, are mostly associated with the city of Akjoujt, in the region of Inchiri. To the north, the Ouled Bisbaa are present in the Moroccan city of Marrakech and the Western Sahara city of Smara. To the south, they are based near Rosso, the native city of Ouled Bisbaa Senator El Hadj. Both Aziz and Ely grew up in Louga, Senegal and their cousin Malainine Ould Tomi's family has businesses in Saint Louiss. Many Ouled Bisbaa from the south speak fluent Wolof and to many native Hassanya speakers, Aziz's Hassanya is not up to par. It is commonly said that General Aziz is not really a Mauritanian but a Moroccan or a Senegalese. In many political circles, Aziz is accused of having surrounded himself with Mauritians close to Morocco and "installing a small Rabat" at the Presidential Palace.

¶5. (SBU) A diverse grouping of small factions without real contact among them, the Ouled Bisbaa, unlike most Moor tribes, have always lacked central leadership. Most recently, reputed Ouled Bisbaa businessmen have become tribal leaders of sort. Among them we can cite Mohamed Hmayenne Bouamtou, the Ould Ghadde brothers; and Mohamed Baba Oul

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Ezizi Ould Mamy, young entrepreneur and local representative for many French-based businesses. It is rumored that the Ouled Bisbaa's inability to reconcile Vall and Aziz lies in this lack of traditional "wisemen" leadership. This division, many claim, will weaken the tribe's influence, which is disproportionate to its demographic weight. It may also hurt Aziz's chances of winning the election, as it is rumored that Vall is the favorite of many Ouled Bisbaa.

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OTHER TRIBES' PERCEPTION  
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¶6. (SBU) Other tribes are wary of Ouled Bisbaa supremacy. Memories of Smasside supremacy -- former dictator Ould Taya's tribe, which is

based in the Atar region and which controlled commerce and politics during Taya's time -- are still fresh. Furthermore, more numerous and traditionally influential Moor tribes like the Smasside themselves are resentful that a small tribe like the Ouled Bisbaa has been able to amass so much money and influence -- essentially seeing them as coarse upstarts. Aziz's harsh discourse against corruption makes them uneasy that Aziz will persecute them if he's elected. Also, Aziz is viewed as a very ignorant man not fit to represent Mauritania abroad. The Ouled Bisbaa, many claim, "are arrogant rogues that do not really have roots in Mauritania."

¶7. (C) Some Moors stress that Aziz and his manipulations to benefit his tribesmen have exacerbated traditional Mauritanian tribal attitudes, a return to "feudal and tribal traffic of influences." Aziz's political ambitions have brought other tribal elements closer together to oppose Ouled Bisbaa power. Comment: In a recent visit to Ambassador, pro-Taya businessman Lemrabott confirmed this by saying many groups had financed actions to ensure Aziz and Vall do not win the election. End comment. Ironically, at the same time, the Ouled Bisbaa's push to take over political power has completely upset traditional political and tribal alliances. In this election, unheard of alliances or what Mauritians describe as "against nature" alliances have emerged. For example, the recent pact between Ahmed Ould Daddah and his long-time Smasside enemies has been motivated by the Ouled Bisbaa threat. Many strange bed fellows have emerged in reaction to Aziz's push for power.

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THE OULED BISBAA IN RECENT YEARS  
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¶8. (C) Many Mauritians believe that the August 6, 2008 coup d'etat orchestrated by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz is an Ouled Bisbaa's attempt to control not only the military but to consolidate their political and economic power. Some will link this to the desire to gain control just as Mauritians begin to see the possibility of significant petroleum revenues -- essentially to set themselves up as the Mauritanian "Al Sauds" before the money really begins to flow. The Ouled Bisbaa are a small and fractioned tribe of Moroccan origin who have a reputation for their outstanding business skills and who acquired influence in the military through Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz's and Ely Ould Mohamed Vall Eleya's privileged relationship with Maaouiya Ould Taya and his Smasside tribe -- colonels at the time, they were Commander of the Presidential Battalion (BASEP) and Chief of Security and Intelligence respectively. This alliance with the Smasside allowed Vall and other tribesmen to become rich and powerful (reftel) Note: Vall came to the military through family connections with the Ould Taya's -- Ely's sister Lemliha Mint Eleya was married to Sid'Ahmed Ould Taya. Ely helped Aziz join the military and later Aziz ended up marrying the daughter of an influential Smasside tribesman who was very close to Ould Taya. End note.

¶9. (C) The cousins put themselves on the Mauritanian political map in 2005 through a coup d'etat against Ould Taya. According to Mauritanian popular lore, Aziz was the brain of the coup while Vall became the face. These rumors were recently confirmed by Aziz during a political rally in which he prided himself in being the author of the 2005 coup

and stated Vall "was asleep when the 2005 coup happened." Many Mauritians add spice to the story by stating that "Vall was dragged out of bed to become the junta's leader." Note: Aziz is reputed for being a very ignorant and coarse person whereas Vall is charismatic, refined and articulate. End note. Vall, who has since become one of the richest men in Mauritania through very opaque business activities, successfully presided the country during the transitional period leading to the 2007 elections and carried considerable favor with the West for not running for president and for peacefully transferring power to democratically elected president Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi.

¶10. (SBU) While Vall semi-retired from the military after the 2007 election, Aziz, who's Ouled Bisbaa cousin Khatou Mint Boukary was Abdallahi's wife and first lady of Mauritania, continued leading the BASEP and was promoted to the rank of General by President Abdallahi. Aziz was rumored to have considerable influence over Abdallahi; influence that Abdallahi both sought and resented. The General was at the heart of the parliamentarian conspiracies that blocked the Abdallahi government and Mauritanian institutions in 2007. Abdallahi's final fallout with Aziz and his generals, particularly Aziz, unleashed the August 6 coup d'etat.

¶11. (C) The Ouled Bisbaa, who have invested a lot of resources in the August 6, 2008 coup and who have benefited from it through appointments and privileges, have been holding on to power for the last ten months by all means possible. Ouled Bisbaa businessman and banker Mohamed Hmayenne Bouamatou has been a staunch coup supporter and is rumored to be Aziz's main source of campaign financing. Ould Bouamatou is perhaps the richest man in Mauritania with a solid stake in Mauritania Airlines, a bank, a cement factory, telephone company, cigarette franchise, and many other interests. His early history reads like Horatio Alger, starting with a canteen to help him meet his high school costs and building gradually in wealth and influence. He really took off after 2000 when cousin's Aziz and Vall gained influence. Bouamatou is considered to have exceptionally close ties with the "FranceAfrique" clique in Paris that has shifted French policy from Sarkozy's original tough line to its later "security-driven" approach. Bouamatou is frequently accused of heavy involvement in drug trafficking although we have never seen solid evidence to support the charge. Other Ouled Bisbaa who have supported and benefited from the coup include Foreign Affairs Minister Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou; Chamber of Commerce President Mohamedou Ould Mohamed Mahmoud (who's also the Minister of Foreign Affairs' father); Malainine Ould Tomi, former Chief of Mission for the High State Council, Mohsen Ould El Hadj, Rosso Senator; Ould Benhmeida, Governor of the Central Bank of Mauritania; and businessmen Mohamed Lemine Ould El Mamy, Ahmed Ould Ghadda, and Azizi Ould El Mamy.

¶12. (SBU) Nevertheless, the tribe has been deeply divided by Aziz and Vall's enmity. At some point in 2007, Aziz and Vall had a fallout and have never since reconciled. Rumor says that Vall wanted to run for President and that Aziz opposed his candidacy in favor of Abdallahi. The 2008 coup was Aziz's doing and Vall kept a considerable distance from the events and even criticized them. The fact that two Ouled Bisbaa tribesmen and close cousins are opposing each other publicly in an electoral race is unheard off in Mauritania, where blood is thick and where people will do anything to save tribal face.

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TRIBALISM PREVAILS  
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¶12. (SBU) Many claim Mauritians remain deeply tribal. In periods of competition with outside elements or other ambitious tribes, tribes still close ranks and form alliances following the "Assabiya" concept or esprit de corps. What's new in Mauritanian society, they say, is that the prestige of the elders has been lost to the businessmen, politicians and civil servants, who are clientelistic and lack traditional principles. These interest groups take precedence over the tribe and the tribe is less successful at directing the votes of their members as efficiently as before. The irony, again, is that these new dynamics are weakening tribal identities and giving way to a more modern political system.

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COMMENT  
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¶13. (SBU) Ouled Bisbaa's influence in Mauritania since 2005 through figures like Aziz, Vall and Bouamatou, is undeniable. It is also an aberration from the point of view of tribal equilibrium and traditional tribal politics. The fact that such a small tribe has amassed so much money and power is a threat for other tribes, who are making new alliances and attempting to close ranks against an Aziz win. If they are successful and if there is no electoral fraud, Aziz could lose the election. What is certain is that, from a tribal perspective, Ouled Bisbaa's push for power through Aziz, and even Vall, is far from leaving other tribes indifferent and may give a Moor candidate like Ould Daddah a good chance to win the elections.

BOULWARE