Sudan – What are the prospects for democracy?

Irit Back

The year 2017 was a tough period for autocrats in Africa, as was demonstrated by the stepping down of long-serving strongman Yahya Jammeh from Gambia in the beginning of that year, and later with the ouster of Robert Mugabe from Zimbabwe. This year seems even tougher, with the removal of South African president Jacob Zuma and the sudden and unexpected resignation of Ethiopia's prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn and the rise to power of Abiy Ahmed. These personal transitions, combined with the high tide of protests and inquiries regarding the legitimacy of power transfers, were irrefutable proof of the fact that the discourse about democracy and democratization is "alive and kicking" in present-day Africa. The discourse on transitions of power, elections and democratization is also (and perhaps particularly) relevant to Sudan. Omar al-Bashir, with 28 years of rule in Khartoum, is currently the fourth longest-serving leader in all of Africa (after the leaders of Guinea-Bissau, Cameroon and Uganda).[1]

Speaking at the headquarters of the paramilitary Popular Defence Forces (PDF), al-Bashir referred to the issue of his own candidacy in the forthcoming 2020 elections. According to the constitution, al-Bashir is not allowed to run again for the presidency after two terms. In a typical manner, he referred vaguely to the issue, describing it as a "divine matter," and recited Quranic verses to reinforce his claim.[2] This subject is likely to dog the country over the next two years, as already a number of voices are calling for an amendment of the constitution in order to allow al-Bashir

a third term, both from members of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and from various pro-government civil-society organizations (such as a group called the National Initiative of Youth Around the President).[3] At the same time, opposition and civil-society groups are determined to protest this move.

Political issues are not the only ones facing Sudan, given its problematic socio-economic profile. In the economic sphere, Sudan's economy remained crippled from the loss of oil revenues following the secession of South Sudan in 2011, and it has hit rock bottom this year.[4] The declaration of a new budget in January included the devaluation of the Sudanese pound against the dollar, immediately causing inflation to rise, along with the prices of bread and other staples, sparking a wave of protests across the country. The violent response of the police toward the generally peaceful protesters, along with the arrests of hundreds of them, including several opposition leaders, sparked fresh criticism of Sudan as a constant violator of human rights.

To be sure, accusations of grave violations of human rights, particularly in periods of socio-economic unrest, are not particularly rare amidst the turbulent reality of Eastern African regimes. Nonetheless, the case of present-day Sudan is unique in respect to two cases. First, President al-Bashir was the only incumbent African head of state who was accused in March 2009, and on other occasions by the International Criminal Court (ICC), of committing alleged crimes against humanity for exacerbating the genocide in Darfur. Second, Sudan is also unique in the fact that, contrary to the tendencies of most African states, it allowed the secession of its southern region. These aspects both touch upon the relationship between center and periphery in Sudan, which in turn affect issues of governance, democratization and human rights. A brief historical overview will clarify this observation.

The civil war between the economically destitute South and the politically dominant North erupted even before the British ceded colonial control in 1955, and continued uninterrupted until 1972, when the first phase of the war ended. The war erupted again in 1983, and continued until 2005. During this period, persistent deprivation and underdevelopment (rooted in Sudan's colonial legacy which preferred the Northern Nile Valley at the expense of other regions) were exacerbated by chronic political instability. The negotiations between the North and the South resulted in the January 9, 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which aimed to end the Second Sudanese Civil War as well as to develop democratic governance

countrywide, including through measures such as the nomination of a Sudanese from the South to be vice president of Sudan. In addition, it established a six-year deadline for southern Sudan to hold a referendum on its independence. Yet, already during the negotiation period, news began to spread about an escalating conflict in Sudan's western province, Darfur.

While the inhabitants of Sudan's predominately Christian and traditionalist South argued against Khartoum's hegemonic Nilo-Islamist discourse and fought back with guerilla warfare, Darfurians were less ideologically motivated to oppose the dominant discourse. Though local "African" ethnic groups in Darfur, such as the *Fur*, *Masalit*, and *Zaghawa*, were permanently deprived of political representation, it seemed that the Darfurian interests and hopes of better integration within Sudan focused more on the socio-economic rather than ethno-racial arena. This assumption held until the mid-1980s, when ecological factors, such as desertification and drought, gradually changed the ethno-racial balance in Darfur. The acute competition over water and land resources heightened ethno-racial differences, and fueled mechanisms of hatred and demonization of the "other."

The demand of many Darfurians for equality and development revealed once again the Sudanese government's predilection to use military force and other coercive means instead of searching for ways to create a more equal and genuine distribution of power and wealth between the periphery and the center. Thus, despite international, continental, and regional pressures to solve the conflict and continue with the crucial steps toward peace-building and development, the cycle of violence continues into the present. With an estimated death toll of 500,000 and approximately 3,000,000 (about half of Darfur's population) having become IDP's or refugees, the case of Darfur is considered by many to represent the first genocide of the 21st century.[5]

In addition, there are also prolonged wars in other regions in Sudan, such as the Blue Nile state, located in south-eastern Sudan, and the South Kordofan state, which is famous for the Nuba Mountains that lie at its center. Those conflicts are occasionally referred to as the "forgotten wars," as they are often excluded from international attention compared to the wars in the South and the West. One of the crucial challenges left pending by the 2005 CPA was the issue of unresolved borders, and those states were "left behind" in the issue of their final disposition. The political aspirations of these ignored areas were heightened by violent responses on the part of the Sudanese government and army, which led in turn to the development of a

humanitarian disaster. Displacement data from 2016, for instance, indicate that 172,000 people have fled the Blue Nile State to South Sudan and Ethiopia since the beginning of the war, while similar and probably slightly larger numbers of people have been internally displaced within Sudan itself. In total, these numbers amount to some 40% of the state's population.[6]

To complicate things further, the question of sovereignty over the oil-rich area of Abyei was not concluded during the five years of negotiations between the North and the South. This issue became increasingly salient following South Sudan's independence, and created a highly volatile dynamic. The damage caused by the decline in oil production and its export had a severe effect, not only on the Sudanese economy, as was mentioned earlier, but even more so on the economy of the nascent Republic of South Sudan, since 2013 in the throes of a devastating civil war.

The interface between the fate of these Sudanese regions and internal processes of (de)-democratization and violations of human rights were revealed in the 2017 Human Rights Watch report, which blamed the Sudanese government for the continuing violence in Darfur, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, through its utilization of its' Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and other government-aligned forces which have attacked civilians. The report also blamed Sudan for failing to provide accountability for serious crimes committed during the conflicts, alongside other serious human rights violations. The report claimed that Sudan's national security agency detained student activists, human rights defenders, members of opposition parties and journalists. Authorities prosecuted activists and journalists for their reports and confiscated newspapers.[7]

On the brighter side, however, many people in Sudan are refusing to be ruled "as the personal fief of limited number of corrupt, officialized warlords."[8] In this sense, the development of opposition forces, both in politics and in civil society, that demand a better distribution of power and wealth in both countries could be an encouraging sign of a stronger call for new equality in Sudan. Sudan also has a very distinguished tradition of active opposition against oppressive rulers, both religious and secular. Past examples include the Mahdiyya movement of the late 19th century and the Communist party in the first decades following Sudan's independence, to name a few.[9] Overall, it appears that the combination of continent-wide and local demands for democratization and an improving record on issues of civil rights will

have to be taken into account by the Sudanese political center, and hopefully will motivate genuine change even before the upcoming elections of 2020.

Irit Back is a senior researcher at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, lecturer in the Middle Eastern and African History Department, and the Head of the Inter-University program of African Studies at Tel Aviv University.

[1]"These nine charts tell you what's in store for Africa in 2018", *Quartz Africa,* 3 January, 2018. Available at: https://qz.com/1168720/africa-in-2018-ticking-debt-bomb-internet-shutdowns-startups-innovation-and-visa-travels/

[2]"Sudan's al-Bashir says not preoccupied with re-election in 2020", *Sudan Tribune*, 5 February 2018. Available at: http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article64650

[3]"Al-Bashir reelection campaign launched in Khartoum", *Sudan Tribune*, 20 December 2017. Available at: http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article64302

[4] For a detailed discussion on the influence of oil on the economy of South Sudan, see: Luke A. Patey, "Crude days ahead? Oil and the resource curse in Sudan", *African Affairs*, 109 (2010): 617-636

[5]Eric Reeves, "Internally Displaced Persons in Darfur: The invisible catastrophe, international complicity", *sudanreeves.org*. Last accessed 24 July 2018. http://sudanreeves.org/2017/03/19/internally-displaced-persons-in-darfur-the-invisible-catastrophe/

See also: Gerard Prunier, *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005; Irit Back, *Intervention and Sovereignty in Africa: Conflict Resolution and International Organisations in Darfur*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2015.

[6]Yotam Gidron, "Five Years of War in Blue Nile State: Hope and Despair between the Two Sudans", *Ifriqiya*, 2, 6, September 22, 2016. available at: https://dayan.org/content/five-years-war-blue-nile-state-hope-and-despair-between-two-sudans

[7]The report is available at: https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/sudan

[8] Gerard Prunier, "South Sudan's civil war: towards a progressive analysis," *Open Democracy*, June 16, 2014, p. 7. It should be mentioned that although Prunier attributed this observation to South Sudan's ruling elite, I think it is relevant for Sudan as well.

[9]Gabriel Warburg, *Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in Sudan since the Mahdiyya*, London: Hurst, 2003.