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## **Military or Civilian Rule? The Struggle for the Future of Sudan**

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On April 11, 2019, months of popular street protests led to the ouster of Sudan's President of 30 years, Omar al-Bashir. Since April 6, the protesters in Sudan have maintained a presence in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum. The street in front of the headquarters has been transformed into a massive campground with people sleeping, eating, praying and even watching soccer and music performances. Protesters have set up roadblocks to prevent army vehicles from entering the area and volunteers are checking for weapons at the improvised checkpoints that control entry into the protesters' campground. So far, their efforts have proven effective. The Transitional Military Council, which took over from al-Bashir, has not managed to disperse the protesters, remove the roadblocks, or impose a curfew. What were the events that led to the protest movement that removed Omar al-Bashir from power? What are the demands of the protesters? Why are they still massed in front of the military headquarters?

The protests started in mid-December 2018, when hundreds of people in the northern city of Atbara took to the streets to protest the tripling of the bread prices after a three-week bread shortage. Yet small-scale demonstrations had taken place across the country for a number of months, organized by marginalized youth, unpaid schoolteachers, critical journalists, and the oppositionist Sudanese Congress Party.<sup>1</sup> These smaller demonstrations, however, failed to crystallize into one movement.

For years, the Sudanese economy had been staggering. Twenty years of U.S. economic sanctions, which were imposed as a result of the Sudanese government's links to international terrorist organizations, contributed to Sudan's economic woes.

In 2017, the Obama Administration lifted the sanctions, yet Sudan remained on the U.S. State Sponsors of Terrorism list. This fact combined with the culture of corruption in governance, the difficulty with money transactions from, to and within Sudan, and the al-Bashir regime's association with the Darfur genocide led many international companies to avoid Sudan. In recent years, crushing inflation and shortages of basic commodities made life for ordinary Sudanese increasingly difficult. In the months leading up to the Atbara street protests, many people stood in line for hours to buy their ration of subsidized bread, fill their cars with fuel, or withdraw their daily limit of the equivalent of \$4 from ATM machines. Basic medicines such as insulin were hard to find. The public's patience wore thin.

The youth of Sudan had also grown increasingly dissatisfied with the government. Their lack of personal freedoms, their frustration with nepotism and corruption, their anger over the government's attempt to divide and rule by sowing discord among people of different racial, tribal, and religious backgrounds, and their memory of government atrocities in Darfur fostered passionate anti-government feelings. Women in particular, who had withstood the worst of the Islamist regime's Public Order Law, were anxious for their freedom. The law stipulated that women could be arrested or beaten for wearing tight or revealing clothes, uncovering their hair, or being seen alone with a man who is not their relative. The police used this law to arbitrarily harass women and to seek bribes. Therefore, there were many women ready to fight for their personal freedoms when the opportunity came.

The mid-December 2018 return of opposition leader Sadiq al-Mahdi from self-imposed exile was a turning point. He returned just one day after the protests in Atbara began. Sadiq al-Mahdi is not only the head of the oppositionist Umma Party, and the former Prime Minister of Sudan (1966-67, 1986-89), he also evokes the memory of Sudan's history of indigenous battle against illegitimate and foreign rule. His great-grandfather was the self-proclaimed Mahdi who fought against the British in the 1880s and 1890s. While Sadiq al-Mahdi could not have foreseen the outcome, and most likely never intended that his return would coincide with the beginning of a mass movement that would oust Omar al-Bashir, the timing of his return drew enthusiastic crowds to the street. For large portions of the Sudanese public, al-Mahdi's return served as the needed spark.

Following al-Mahdi's return, Sudanese of all ages and from diverse ethnic, tribal, and religious backgrounds came together several times a week for protests and other forms of civil disobedience that were organized by the Sudanese Professionals Association all over the country. The protests were peaceful, with the exception of some rock throwing and burning of tires. Nevertheless, the government sent the

army to violently crack down on the protesters, using tear gas and live ammunition. Snipers on Khartoum's rooftops targeted protest leaders. In January 2019, security forces forcefully entered Omdurman hospital, and opened fire at wounded protesters and doctors. People who offered shelter to wounded or fleeing protesters were in immediate danger of being shot. The day after the attack on Omdurman hospital, Omar al-Bashir organized a rally for his supporters in Khartoum's Green Yard, where he bussed in civil servants and poor people from the countryside. To celebrate his regime, he even danced at the televised event.

However, in spite of his efforts to crush the demonstrations, they continued to gather steam. Eventually Mohamed Hamdan Dagolo Hemeti's Rapid Support Forces, who had blood on their hands from their participation in the Darfur Genocide, were called in to disperse the protests. Many protesters were arrested and tortured: methods included the shaving of women's heads, the breaking of limbs, and isolation in a freezing cold room for hours or days on end. Some protesters were released fairly quickly, while others disappeared.<sup>2</sup>

The protesters quickly dismissed any comparisons to the 2011 "Arab Spring" protests. "We have watched what happened in Egypt," one young protester said, "and we are not going to make the same mistake."<sup>3</sup> Another reason for not wanting to make comparisons to the Arab Spring was the very fact of its being "Arab." Protesters emphasized the unique Sudanese character of their revolution. They preferred to compare the 2018-19 revolution to the April 1985 ouster of the military regime of Ja'far al-Nimeiri and the October 1964 ouster of Ibrahim 'Abdoud. Both of these revolutions brought about democratic regimes, even though they were short-lived. The protesters also preferred to emphasize the "Sudanese-ness" of the revolution, because of the hated Arab supremacism promoted by Omar al-Bashir's regime, which was meant to create division between the "Arabs" and the "Africans" of Sudan. The revolutionary movement envisioned a re-construction of Sudanese identity, which would be inclusive of Sudanese people of all backgrounds.<sup>4</sup>

The demonstrations continued for months, until on Thursday, April 11, 2019, Defense Minister Mohammed Ahmed 'Awad Ibn 'Auf announced on live television that President al-Bashir had been placed under arrest and that the armed forces would head up a transitional authority for a period of two years. Suspicious of the military's intentions, and insisting on a transition to a democratic government of civilians, the protesters stayed put. Within 24 hours, Ibn Auf resigned from his position as the head of the Transitional Military Council. Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman Burhan took his place and vowed to restructure the government with Hemeti, the former leader of the Rapid Support Forces, as his

deputy. However, the protesters did not budge. The Sudanese Professionals Association presented a list of demands to the military, while more and more people gathered in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum. Trains carrying protesters from Atbara to Khartoum were so packed that people sat on the roof and hung out of the windows.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, three members of the Transitional Military Council resigned after the Sudanese Professionals Association had called for a million strong march to put pressure on the Council.

Since the fall of Omar al-Bashir, the leadership of the protest movement, referring to itself as “the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change,” has been negotiating with the Transitional Military Council. In their declaration, written before the toppling of al-Bashir, the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change demanded “the formation of a National Transitional Government,” specifying that “[it] will be formed of qualified people based on merits of competency and good reputation, representing various Sudanese groups and receiving the consensus of the majority. Their role is to govern for a term of four years, until a sound democratic structure is established, and elections held.”<sup>6</sup>

As of May 14, the military and the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change have agreed on a three-year transitional period and a transitional government in which 67 percent of the members would be civilian. The parties were negotiating the details of the sovereign council, which would form the ruling body during the transitional period.<sup>7</sup> The talks were temporarily suspended by the military for a number of days when the protesters refused to give up the barricades and “unidentified elements” opened fire at the protesters, leaving several dead.<sup>8</sup>

The people in the streets remain anxious that the inevitable compromises will turn out to be merely a cover for the continuation of a military and Islamist “deep state” rule in the end. Women especially, who have been at the forefront of the revolution, are adamant about being fairly represented in the transitional government in order to make sure that their voices will be heard.<sup>9</sup> There are also concerns about the future of Sudan’s economic situation. While they are waiting with patience and perseverance, the hope remains that an agreement will be reached that will be a turning point in Sudan’s history. Until then, the protesters will remain camped out in front of Khartoum’s military headquarters indefinitely.

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<sup>1</sup> *al-Baath*, August 27, 2018; *al-Midan*, August 30, 2018; *al-Jareeda*, October 16, 2018; *al-Jareeda*, December 9, 2018; *Sudan Tribune*, December 12, 2018; *Sudan Tribune*, December 17, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *The New York Times*, April 4, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with the author, Khartoum, January 26, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with protesters by the author, January and February 2019.

<sup>5</sup> *Reuters*, April 23, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> [Declaration of Freedom and Change](#), Khartoum, January 1, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> *al-Jazeera*, May 14, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> *BBC*, May 14, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> *al-Jazeera*, 23 April 2019.