

SUDDEN SUCCESSION



Examining the Impact of Abrupt Change in the Middle East

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Sudan: The End Comes for Bashir

On April 11, 2019, longtime Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir was ousted from power by the military. The move was announced by First Vice President and Defense Minister Awad Muhammad ibn Auf, who had only become vice president in a February 23, 2019, cabinet reshuffle ordered by Bashir. The reshuffle and the president's subsequent removal from power followed months of popular protests that had intensified in recent weeks.¹

But Bashir's departure on its own hardly ensures a fairer, more pluralistic future for Sudan. Ibn Auf himself faces U.S. sanctions for abuses during the war in Darfur and holds only modest influence within the military.² On the afternoon of the supposed overthrow, protestors grew agitated over the idea that the whole transition might be a stunt.³



Initial reactions indicated that the newly created interim military council might not embody the ideals of the protestors, suggesting more of a realignment than a revolution. And to the disappointment of many, Bashir was moved to a “safe place” rather than to trial, whether at home or at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, where he was charged a decade ago with crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide.⁴ Also troubling was the military council’s initial assertion that the state of emergency declared in February 2019 would remain in effect and that presidential elections would have to wait two more years. As for groups purportedly involved in the transition, they included the police, a fearsome collection of military units known as the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). But the individuals wielding power remained obscure on day one, as did their ages. The younger generation tends to have more in common with the protestors.

The second day of the interim military council saw a bit more clarity, with the country’s new rulers insisting that the transition period could be much quicker than two years and that except for the Defense and Interior Ministries, the interim government would be entirely civilian in character. Extending an olive branch to demonstrators, the head of the council’s political committee said solutions to the country’s massive economic and political problems would also be driven by civil society.⁵ And last of all, ibn Auf himself stepped down from his role as head of the transition the day after he’d assumed it.⁶ Falling with him were the interim council’s deputy chief of staff, Kamal Abdel Marouf al-Mahi, and the powerful head of Sudanese intelligence, NISS chief Maj. Gen. Salah Gosh. The council will now be led by Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan Abdelrahman.

Even bearing in mind the concerns set forth here, the news of Bashir’s departure set off ripples of possibility, marking the end of a brutal decades-long reign and offering the welcome prospect of change.

The following discussion, initially drafted and edited before the ouster, characterizes the scene in Sudan from late December 2018 through mid-April 2019. It explains the dynamics underlying the latest unrest

and how Sudan, despite its fractured past, could be positioned to embrace elements of democracy.

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Had the regime of former Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir survived until June 30, 2019, it would have been thirty years old. For months leading up to its ultimate overthrow on April 11, the rallying cry in the streets had been “*tasgut bass*”: “just fall already”—or more to the point, just go away.⁷ Rather than a specific plan or program, the purpose of the mobilization was simply to end Bashir’s reign.⁸ Dozens were killed and thousands injured or arrested during this period, although the regime avoided some of the even more extreme violence it has routinely visited upon the country’s peripheral areas in the past.

The demonstrations that erupted in December 2018 after food shortages and a rise in the price of bread did not subside even following the February 22, 2019, state of emergency declaration, the first in two decades, and intensified regime pressure against demonstrators. On March 21, a month after the state of emergency was declared, forty separate peaceful demonstrations still occurred, scattered throughout the country, only to grow more vigorous in the April days leading to Bashir’s overthrow. The protests, finding acceptance in the larger society, saw demonstrators for the first time in decades taking to the alleys and streets of villages.⁹ On April 6, protestors evaded roadblocks and teargas to stage one of the largest rallies since December 2018, a peaceful sit-in lasting hours outside Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) headquarters, one of Khartoum’s most sensitive sites.¹⁰

Fresh divisions had emerged among Islamists over supporting the regime and, breaking years of precedent, people even chanted anti-government slogans in mosques. Inside Sudan, the uprising proved surprisingly durable, and the police and security services were worn down as citizens from more regions joined in.

All this suggested the masses were more determined to oust Bashir this time and didn’t believe elections under the current leadership would solve anything. For their part, protest leaders appeared to be learning and instructing people on creative ways to anticipate repression and avoid being boxed in

by regime security forces. While some of the initial euphoria of “*tasgut bass*” dimmed at times, many in the Sudanese diaspora remained convinced that this time would be different—that even if the regime had not fallen immediately, Bashir’s grip on power was weakened as never before.

The beginning of the crisis may have suggested something less momentous. Late in 2018, the leadership still seemed very much in control, with Bashir trying to look presidential while consulting with counterparts in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt in a ceaseless search for money and tokens of support. Separately, over the decades, he had repeatedly purged and vetted the military and security services to ensure their loyalty, and they had more or less complied. According to activists on the ground, this time a number of police and security officers refused to attack the crowds, with at least some of the killing done by militias tied to Bashir’s National Congress Party (NCP). In March 2019, Bashir resigned his leadership of the NCP, presumably to appear as more of a unifying national leader, rather than a party politician. But the step struck some observers as interesting at least on a symbolic level.¹¹

The Road to the Regime’s Fall

Even in view of Bashir’s efforts, the security services cannot be immunized from personal ambition. After all, in 1989 it was Brigadier Bashir—by no means the senior-most officer in the Sudanese Armed Forces—who overthrew the democratically elected prime minister Sadiq al-Mahdi. And Bashir had absorbed the lessons of October 1964 and April 1985, when the SAF sided with demonstrators, overthrew the sitting dictator, and eventually restored democracy to the country.

Bashir and his NCP actually presided over four “armies,” allowing the ever-suspicious leadership to exploit divisions to maintain authority. The first, largest, and best armed is the SAF. The second, a rival entity, comprises the earlier-noted security force and secret police known collectively as the NISS, which in May 2008 prevented a group of bold Darfuri raiders from the rebel Justice and Equality Movement from

crossing the Nile bridges into Khartoum city. Bashir stoked the SAF-NISS competition. The third “army,” the so-called popular defense forces, consists of irregular party militias from areas across Sudan’s periphery that traditionally have an Islamist orientation.¹²

And the fourth emerged from the war in Darfur waged by the government against the region’s non-Arab inhabitants. Built of Arab border guards and other informal units, the earlier-mentioned group, known as the RSF, was enlisted in September 2013 to brutally suppress demonstrations in Khartoum. Although connected to the NISS, the RSF does not reflexively follow NISS or regime directives. Led by Gen. Muhammad Hamdan Daqlu “Hametti,” RSF members are well-compensated mercenaries loyal to Khartoum. But given their origins as camel-herding Mahariyya tribesmen from Darfur, they have been wary of becoming regime scapegoats or cannon fodder, despite their notoriety for being part of the Janjaweed militia used in the vicious counterinsurgency in Darfur.¹³ Far from standing up as a pillar of the Bashir regime, the RSF served surprisingly as an agent in its downfall, a striking change from its role against demonstrators in 2013–14.¹⁴

In the months leading up to April 11, many sensed that Bashir was a dead man walking. No one in the region, including the Qataris, Saudis, or Egyptians, had the cash or the will to ameliorate Sudan’s major problems. Formerly, Gulf states had provided substantial temporary relief to Khartoum after South Sudan’s independence in 2011 prompted a steep decline in the north’s oil exports, and in 2015 after the regime distanced itself from Iran.¹⁵ Nor could the country’s new friends in Ankara or old ones in Tehran provide sufficient backing to restore a sustainable status quo. On the flipside, no outside states with any real clout were actively working to remove Bashir from power, despite his claims of a “foreign agenda” behind the demonstrations. The pressure on the regime was instead overwhelmingly national and domestic. While modest funds might have accrued from a new oil deal with South Sudan, this would have given only a provisional boost for a Khartoum regime, to recall the words of the late Sudanese revolutionary John Garang, “too deformed to be reformed.”

The regime, however, showed much deftness to remain in power as long as it did. Just a month before the demonstrations began, in November 2018, parliament members introduced a bill to scrap presidential term limits, allowing Bashir to keep his post after 2020. But the potential risks of pursuing this course amid the national unease spurred legislators to set it aside.

Past instances of NCP tactical flexibility showed the ruling party's will to survive. All the while, the regime stayed more or less ideologically cohesive and wielded unbridled force when necessary. Consider that Sudan went from being a center of global jihadism and a host to Osama bin Laden to signing a peace deal and sharing power from 2005 to 2011 with largely non-Muslim, leftist, and secular rebels from the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). It also went from being a state sponsor of terrorism to cooperating closely with the Central Intelligence Agency on counterterrorism. Moreover, a decade ago, the regime was helpful to Washington on counterterrorism *and* helpful to Iran on smuggling weapons into Gaza for use by Hamas.

To summarize, Bashir and his NCP had been here before. In September and October 2013, when tens of thousands of people demonstrated against the regime, it responded with mass repression and divide-and-conquer tactics. Less than two years later, Bashir was reelected in fraudulent elections with 94.5 percent of the vote.

A Teetering Status Quo

One of the strengths of the current, peaceful uprising in Sudan has been its nontraditional, diffuse nature, spearheaded by a group known as the Sudanese Professionals Association, bolstered by youth, women, and urban poor; it has forged a different path from that followed by the country's traditional political opposition and armed rebel groups. In an echo of the Arab Spring, which began almost a decade ago, this mobilization by Sudanese civil society has been facilitated by amateurs who are using social media (#SudanUprising, #SudanProtests, and #Sudan_Revolution) and mobile phones to spread their message.

The protestors likewise will be wary of tired calls for "national dialogue," even in the post-overthrow days, given decades of cynical manipulation of the political-dialogue process by the Bashir regime. The last such dialogue round, launched in January 2014, failed, and it is hard to imagine opposition leaders agreeing to another, even if actors like the African Union advocate this path. Regime remnants simply lack the credibility to be trusted. Indeed, vague calls for more dialogue were repeatedly made by a blustering Bashir once the seriousness of the 2019 demonstrations became apparent. And the political opposition, despite its traditional divisions, has now tasted success. At last, the NCP modus operandi rooted in "process instead of results" and "motion instead of progress" appears to have fallen short.

The regime's tactics—implementing a state of emergency, cabinet reshuffle, and mass arrests, while suppressing demonstrations—perhaps delayed the inevitable, but another threat loomed: term limits in 2020 for a president who could now wind up at the ICC. Bashir may be able to avoid extradition by seeking refuge in certain Arab or African countries, but his protection will never be assured even if he does so. Certainly, the ICC charges have not helped facilitate a political transition in Sudan. They have had the opposite effect, with awful consequences—if anything, strengthening Bashir's will to remain in power.

Among the higher ranks, some officers in the security services were undoubtedly engaged in quiet consultation about the prospective tipping point for the regime. In addition to the NISS and SAF leadership, political officials were reading the *karkadeh* (hibiscus) leaves and weighing the odds. Specifically, the February 2019 government reshuffle offered a peek at some of these internal machinations. A top-level case was that of Gen. Bakri Saleh, a longtime intimate of Bashir's who was for decades awarded senior positions but ultimately forced out. In February, he was replaced as first vice president by Defense Minister Awad Muhammad ibn Auf, positioning the latter as an obvious potential heir.¹⁶ Also quite prominent in public discussions of the unrest has been the NISS director, Salah Gosh, known to be a wily operator.¹⁷ Bashir had at points sacked both Auf and Gosh, who

are institutional rivals—sending the former to serve as ambassador to Oman; imprisoning the latter—although they were later rehabilitated.

Two other previously powerful regime figures still aspired to hold power: former first vice president Ali Osman Taha and former presidential assistant Nafie Ali Nafie, both of whom are tainted with serious accusations of human rights abuses.¹⁸ Both also mistakenly believed they could manipulate their proximity to the president to ultimately take his place. This is not unlike the way Bashir outmaneuvered their mentor, the late Sudanese ideologue Hassan al-Turabi. Amid this backstage jockeying, Bashir did not appear ready to leave office willingly, although in general terms security figures are best positioned to replace him, rather than regime civilians, especially people with as much baggage as Taha and Nafie.

The success of political Islamists in Sudan bears mention here. Even before the 1989 coup, Islamists within the National Islamic Front wielded great influence in the country. They played a key role when former leftist president Gaafar al-Nimeiry turned to Islamism in 1979 and retained influence throughout the years prior to Bashir's seizure of power.¹⁹ Solely in terms of survival, the Sudanese regime is the most successful Islamist government in the Arab world, excepting the hereditary rulers of the Arabian Peninsula. This makes Bashir's recent retreat from his NCP helm somewhat notable. Succeeding Bashir on the job is Ahmed Haroun, a non-Arab Darfuri who served as the regime's "firefighter," responsible for extinguishing flare-ups in various regions. Since 2007, he has also been wanted by the ICC for war crimes. Very few saw this change as more than window dressing—the ambitious Haroun was still later appointed as a presidential assistant—and Bashir's move underscored his attempt to maintain the regime's core national security leadership. Knowing Haroun's current fate would no doubt be interesting—whether he is perhaps under house arrest or, alternatively, still influential with the generals.

Change in Khartoum

There is little reason to fear a transition in Sudan. Unlike some other countries in the region, Sudan is

actually somewhat equipped to transition to democracy—better than, say, Libya, however battered the national economy and political system. The country has real civil society players, a lively sector of non-governmental and social institutions, and a history of actual transition to democracy, even as this history has been far from perfect and often profoundly tainted by the conflict with the south. The diaspora includes standouts such as the Sudanese-British telecommunications billionaire Mo Ibrahim and many other well-educated professionals, from the Gulf to the United States and Canada.²⁰

Some of Sudan's neighbors, such as Chad and South Sudan, might welcome the change of regime in Khartoum. Both countries have suffered at the hands of Khartoum-supported rebel factions. But other Arab governments, from Cairo to Doha to Riyadh, likely preferred the devil they knew, even the unlovable Bashir, to a wildcard successor regime. Many of these would be equally comfortable with a military council made up of Bashir's generals. The opposite, a democratic revolutionary government, would make them more nervous. Indeed, a democratic, formerly Islamist Sudan would by its very nature be troubling to the authoritarian powers-that-be in the Arab world. Yet only sincerely reformist and enlightened governments can hope to begin addressing the massive political and economic challenges Sudan and the rest of the region face. A new Sudan would hardly be the obvious candidate to lead this charge, but it might inspire activists in other countries to take incremental steps forward. Certainly, emergent change in Sudan succeeding that in Algeria would rightly be seen by many regional observers as constituting a trend.

As for the worst-case scenarios, Sudan is not likely to descend into anarchy or chaotically break apart, despite its reputation as a country perennially on the edge—"the turbulent state," in the words of researcher Alex de Waal.²¹ Still, plenty of neighbors have designs on Sudanese territory, including an Egypt unhappy with Sudan's pretensions to reignite an old dispute over the Halaib Triangle, which spans a small but potentially mineral-rich part of the two countries' Red Sea coast.

Policy Recommendations for Washington

Where is the United States in all of this? In contrast to past years, when a strong Sudan lobby operated in Washington, the levels of personal or emotional involvement today are much reduced, with the most serious attention to Sudan seeming to come from the intelligence community and the counterterrorism constituency within the U.S. administration.

Certainly, the United States lost nothing by acknowledging the demands of the demonstrators and calling for their rights to be respected. The “troika” (United States, Britain, and Norway) along with Canada did just this in their statement on February 26, in which they expressed their “deep concern” over the situation in Sudan. They further called for “political and economic reform in Sudan that is fully inclusive, and which addresses the legitimate grievances expressed by the protestors. Economic stability cannot be achieved without first reaching political consensus. Political consensus cannot be achieved by imprisoning, shooting, and criminalizing peaceful protesters.”²² Yet both the regime and demonstrators could only regard this statement as the diplomatic equivalent of treading water. It was joined by no proposed action.

Rather more significant for the regime was what it heard through security channels, Phase II talks with the Trump administration, and meetings such as the September 2018 session between U.S. deputy secretary of state John J. Sullivan and Sudanese foreign

minister Dirdeiry Mohamed Ahmed. In the recent past, U.S. engagement has logically and reasonably been based on an understanding of solid regime control, assuming that the Bashir/NCP government would remain in place.²³ But this assumption has now been upended.

The United States rightly suspended Phase II talks after Bashir’s overthrow, awaiting greater clarity on the successor leadership. Little benefit would seem to issue from negotiating major issues with an interim military council of doubtful pedigree and unknown political orientation. And since the council announced the dismissal of the former government, the principal civilian Sudanese interlocutors for the Americans and the troika remain unknown anyway.

Until events forced their hand, the ruling elites appeared intent on muddling through the economic crisis and the demonstrations, holding on into 2020, and just hoping everything would cohere. This approach was based on long experience in successfully managing disaster. But it was a cynical ploy, deserving no reinforcement from Washington. Now that a momentous shift seems to have occurred, many questions remain: Who will run the new government? Who will guide Sudan’s desperate economy, which is overwhelmed by soaring inflation? And what will happen to the long-preeminent NCP?²⁴ Answers to these and other uncertainties will help determine whether Sudan becomes a model of modest reform or reverts to its old cycle wherein military rule alternates with leadership by an entrenched political class that engages in unchecked corruption.

Notes

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