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Popular Protest, Democratic Prospects, and U.S. Policy Dilemmas in the Middle East

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Alberto Fernandez is vice president of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) and a former senior State Department official.



Brief Analysis

Three experts discuss how Washington should shape its regional response to persistent protest movements, economic struggles, and democratic backsliding.

On November 30, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Chiraz Arbi, Yasir Zaidan, and Alberto Fernandez, moderated by Sarah Feuer, coauthor of the recent Institute paper "[Washington and the Next Arab Spring](#)." Arbi is a Tunisian political analyst and a regional consultant for UN Women. Zaidan is a part-time lecturer at the National University-Sudan. Fernandez, the vice president of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), formerly served as U.S. charge d'affaires in Sudan and the State Department's coordinator for strategic counterterrorism communications, among other posts. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Chiraz Arbi

To understand the Tunisian public reaction to President Kais Saied's actions over the past several months, it is important to consider two defining moments. First, when Saied removed the government and suspended parliament on July 25, many Tunisians supported his decision. The country had made some progress since 2011, when Arab Spring protests led to the ouster of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. Yet socioeconomic improvements had not kept pace with advancements in political rights. The people therefore felt that democracy did not deliver on its promises, and many were happy when Saied dissolved parliament, the face of Tunisian democracy.

Yet the outlook shifted on September 22, when Saied announced that he would rule by decree, suspend parts of the constitution not related to freedoms, and end judicial review for reforms. Since then, Tunisia has entered a dictatorial period—the government exists in name only, while the president is the sole decisionmaker and ignores civil society organizations that represent the public. The people want transparency, a timeline for ending the president's extraordinary measures, and a clear plan for establishing direct democracy.

Despite vocal resistance from civil society organizations, Saied has not attempted to communicate with these actors or others pushing back against his system of one-man rule. Many citizens therefore feel they have little recourse, since they distrust politics and parties. This disconnect between the political elite and the general populace has widened because of corruption and lack of progress on economic issues.

U.S. support is important for the Tunisian people, but they expect it to be aligned with their aspirations. For example, they appreciated that Washington did not classify Saied's actions as a coup. They support more democratization, but they want to see democracy's practical effects in their daily lives. This is why economic reforms must accompany political reforms—otherwise the next political transition will likely fail.

Yasir Zaidan

The situation in Sudan is more complex than the dominant narrative of competition between the military and the civilian government. Several factors are often overlooked:

- Given the civilian government's incompetence, officials have struggled to form transitional institutions or otherwise govern effectively since the 2019 removal of President Omar al-Bashir.
- The 2020 Juba Peace Agreement between the transitional government and the rebel coalition has exacerbated tribal/urban tensions. Many view the government as an urban-focused entity that does not incorporate tribal elements.
- Political parties have prioritized partisan interests by employing their allies in government. This nepotism has contributed to the perception that parties are only interested in power, not in creating institutions to support the transition to democracy.

The public is very active in street politics, with numerous protests erupting since the recent military takeover. Yet while many people oppose the coup, they lack the mobilization capacity of the crowds who overthrew Bashir. The current protestors are mainly younger, apolitical activists. They would have more impact if they created a wide political umbrella, since that would improve their ability to balance against the military. For its part, the government understands that the public has a role to play in shaping national events and the ongoing democratic transition.

The U.S. response to the military takeover was successful because it was coordinated with regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Egypt. This approach strengthened U.S. pressure on Sudan's military leaders. At the same time, Washington must remember that the military has a role to play in the transition—the country needs elements of the previous regime to side with the people in order to maintain the government's structure and avoid civil war. The United States can play a positive role by assisting in the formulation of transitional principles and procedures.

On the economic front, Sudan's situation is dire. This challenge makes it all the more urgent for the public to see proper institutions and democracy working for them.

Alberto Fernandez

Sudan's legitimate process of street politics has generated growing demands to end the relationship between Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and the military. Yet it is not clear how to translate this desire into a clear political framework. Moreover, the military government—much like Bashir's government—has tried to coopt the strength of Sudan's street movements, manipulating them by inserting their own people into protest groups.

Regarding the U.S. response, there is a key difference between Sudan and Tunisia: the former is undergoing a democratic transition, while Tunisia's president was elected democratically. This legitimacy gives Saied a certain amount of clout in Washington. In contrast, many of Sudan's military authorities were fixtures in Bashir's regime. U.S. officials are therefore more inclined to maintain normal relations with Tunis even as they pressure Sudan.

President Biden's upcoming democracy summit is a golden opportunity to encourage reform—particularly if this diplomatic carrot is accompanied with a stick in the form of sanctions against problematic governments. The administration wants to pull back from engaging in the Middle East, but it must remember that regional leaders sense this, and their decisions are influenced by it. Sudan's coup is just one example in which the perception of American disengagement spurred regional governments to take actions that threaten U.S. interests.

Regarding economics, the Sudanese people believed that the transition to democracy would bring tangible improvements in their daily lives. Thus, it is important to combine economic development with any efforts aimed at political liberalization.

This summary was prepared by Alex Shanahan. ❖



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