After Bashir's Fall, What's Next for Sudan?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

To forge a better future, the country must break the vicious cycle of military rule followed by incompetent, corrupt rule under the same tired political class.

Sudan's most successful regime—measured solely in terms of sheer survival and misery inflicted on its people—will not reach its thirtieth anniversary. It was on June 30, 1989, that an obscure Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) general named Omar al-Bashir overthrew the democratically elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi. At least that is what it looked like from the outside. In reality, it was a hardcore Islamist coup led by the urbane extremist Dr. Hassan al-Turabi working in cooperation with likeminded military elements. In an exquisite bit of theater, Turabi and some of his fellow plotters were detained at the beginning of the coup, creating confusion as to who was actually in charge and disguising the true nature of the resultant regime.

Over the years, however, it became abundantly clear that the Bashir regime was essentially an Islamist regime. If anyone wanted to see what would happen if a Muslim Brotherhood-type government established long-term leadership over an Arab country, Sudan is a better example than Hamas-ruled Gaza or Mohamed Morsi's brief tenure in Egypt.

It is true that Bashir eventually turned on Turabi in 1999, but the doctor's key Islamist lieutenants (e.g., Ali Osman Taha, Nafie Ali Nafie) continued to play an important role for years. Even as its rulers grew old and wealthy on ill-gotten gains, the regime continued to embrace political Islam, at least as a tool for maintaining popular credibility. Witness, for example, its prosecution of a British schoolteacher in the 2007 "Teddy Bear Muhammad" case, or its 2014 imprisonment of Christian citizen Meriam Ibrahim on apostasy charges.

WHO'S IN CHARGE NOW?

On April 11, Sudan's newly created interim military council released a statement announcing Bashir's removal from power, but many questions were left unanswered. Aside from the figure reading the statement on national

television—Defense Minister Awad Muhammad Ibn Auf, a fixture of the regime's security apparatus—who else is in charge? The announcement mentioned the SAF, the police, the feared National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) as institutional participants in the transition, but which specific individuals hold the balance of power? Younger officers tend to share more in common with the thousands of citizens who have staged protests in Sudan for months, but do they have any sway over security decisionmaking?

As for Ibn Auf, he seems an unlikely reformer. In addition to facing U.S. sanctions stemming from the regime's violent repression in Darfur, he is neither beloved nor strongly situated within the military. In fact, Bashir once purged him from the armed forces and sent him off to serve as ambassador to Oman before eventually rehabilitating him.

To be sure, the people are generally happy about the fact that the military has answered their call for Bashir's departure. But many are concerned that the creation of an interim military council is a naked attempt to thwart the popular will and perpetuate control by the same bad actors who were complicit with Bashir's rule—in other words, that it was less a coup removing a regime than a course correction within the same regime. That initial impression is understandable because the interim institutional authorities named thus far do not seem capable of meeting the aspirations of the long-suffering people of Sudan.

Some critics have also noted that the council's decision to detain Bashir "in a safe place" is not enough, demanding that he be put on trial (although they would likely prefer to see him judged in Sudan, they may be amenable to having him sent before the International Criminal Court, so long as he and his enablers face justice). Others may chafe at two of the council's other key announcements: that the formal state of emergency will continue for three months, and that elections will not be held for another two years. The state of emergency and curfew are especially problematic because they appear to set the stage for direct, immediate confrontations between the military council and demonstrators.

Other pressing questions will soon come to the fore as well. With the government dissolved on the national and state level, who exactly will run things? How different will governance actually be if most of the same people remain in charge? Who will oversee Sudan's economy and finances at a time when many demonstrators are focused on pocketbook issues and inflation is running higher than 60 percent? What will become of the dominant National Congress Party and its recently appointed leader, the indicted war criminal Ahmed Haroun? And while the council's statement included the usual language in support of human rights, will there be any freedom of expression or assembly in Sudan under the state of emergency and transitional military rule?

WILL SUDAN STAY 'FLEXIBLE'?

Although the Bashir regime was built solidly on an Islamist base, it was tactically and politically flexible enough to make course corrections as circumstances demanded. Indeed, it was a cynical regime that supported Osama bin Laden and promoted jihadism throughout Africa and the Muslim world in the 1990s, then made peace with the secular, leftist Sudan People's Liberation Movement in 2005, sharing power (more or less) with them for six years and allowing South Sudan to secede in 2011.

Similarly, even as Bashir cooperated with the United States against al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups, he used the odious Lord's Resistance Army against regime adversaries in South Sudan and Central Africa, and also cooperated with Iran in helping Hamas terrorists. The regime later spun yet another cartwheel by dropping Iran as an ally and returning to the Arab fold in time to support the Saudi-led 2015 intervention against Iranian-backed rebels in Yemen. These and other geopolitical acrobatics partly derived from the fact that a corrupt economic basket case like Sudan could not ignore well-heeled partners like Riyadh, Qatar, and Turkey. But will the new Sudan (assuming it is actually new) take the same approach or adopt a different political and economic orientation?

HAVE REGIONAL POPULATIONS HAD ENOUGH?

Whatever happens with the country's new military rulers in the short run, there is some reason for hope in Sudan. Unlike certain other Arab countries that have experienced coups in recent years (e.g., Qadhafi-era Libya), Sudan has a vibrant civil society and political opposition, a tradition of open expression and press freedom, and a talented diaspora that includes visionaries like Sudanese-British billionaire Mo Ibrahim. The ongoing demonstrations that erupted last December were spearheaded not by political parties or armed groups, but by civil society groups such as the Sudanese Professionals Association, with the enthusiastic cooperation of youths, women, and the urban poor. The pressure to remove Bashir came from domestic actors rather than some foreign "hidden hand." There are promising historical precedents as well—in 1964 and 1985, military interventions led to the restoration of democratic rule in Sudan (however briefly), so the latest military action could conceivably lead to a good outcome.

Yet if the potentially rich but perennially destitute country is going to have a better future, it must break the vicious cycle it has been caught in since the 1960s: namely, military rule followed by incompetent, corrupt rule under the same tired political class. A restive and overwhelmingly young population needs a fresh worldview and new leaders capable of seriously tackling the major problems of development, poverty, corruption, and climate change facing the country's 43 million citizens.

Finally, it should be noted that the audience watching events in Sudan extends well beyond Khartoum. Months of concerted political action by peaceful demonstrators in Algeria and Sudan have spurred the removal of long-established leaders and military intervention by authorities making vague promises of reform. These events should be a wakeup call to those regional leaders who seem to believe that they can continue placating hot, hungry, and angry populations with the same formulas indefinitely.

Alberto Fernandez is president of Middle East Broadcasting Networks. The views expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the U.S. government or MBN. ❖

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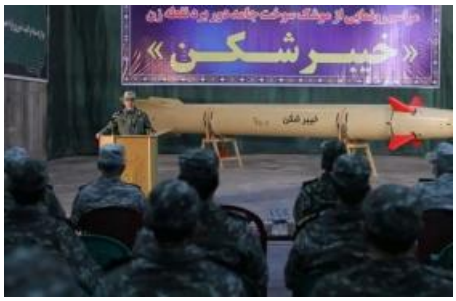

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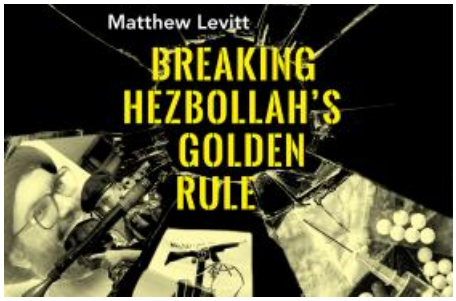

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