

The Potential Outcomes of the Sudanese Uprising

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Brief Analysis

Despite limited media coverage of the uprising in Sudan and the Omar al-Bashir regime's subsequent efforts at repression, the popularity of these uprisings is increasing day by day, spreading across many of the largest cities in the country. The dominating chant of "The people want to overthrow the regime"—echoing earlier chants of the Arab Spring—is of concern to both Khartoum and other governments across the region. It is certain that were the al-Bashir regime to fall, its collapse would have major consequences for several countries in the region, the interests of which al-Bashir is the principal guarantor. Whether these regional concerns and al-Bashir's own tenacity will win out over increasing public pressure remains to be seen, yet the Sudanese government's future is far from clear.

The major driver of these protests is the economic hardships many Sudanese continue to face. Protesters pin much of this economic hardship on governmental actions; President al-Bashir's decision last October to devalue the Sudanese Pound against the dollar and establish a committee to float the exchange rate, coupled with his talk of removing government subsidies for fuel and the subsequent crisis in gasoline and bread have catalyzed Sudanese protesters to action.

With half of the population living in the poverty according to UN estimates, Sudanese have been driven to protest repeatedly due to the country's bleak economic condition, with the most recent major protests occurring in 2013. The current protests began on December 19 in the city of Atbara, where workers spoke out against the scarcity of food and fuel. However, this message has clearly resonated on a national level, with protests breaking in a number of other cities, including the Sudanese capital.

The al-Bashir regime relied on well-worn tactics to defeat the protests on the streets—confiscating independent newspapers as state media issued a continuous babble about foreign conspiracies—but the government has nevertheless failed to take control of the situation. On the contrary, matters are becoming increasingly complicated. Meanwhile, opposition forces have also not yet succeeded in converting the popular uprising to a full revolution to overthrow the regime, perhaps due to the fractured composition of the opposition itself.

The Sudanese opposition is a divided and internally feuding entity. Despite former cooperation, the relationship

between the two largest opposition coalition groups in the country—Nidaa al-Sudan and the National Consensus Forces (NCF)—is acrimonious. Thus, Sudan’s formal opposition movements, though longstanding, are unlikely to be able to work together effectively to shape the protests into a united front against the current regime, especially given the opposition movements’ various disagreements on such issues as South Sudan and how opposition parties should participate in the current government. This has not stopped opposition leaders from supporting the protests in principle: the Nidaa al-Sudan, for example, has explicitly called for al-Bashir to step down in light of the uprising.

As for the Sudanese wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that partially supported Omar al-Bashir’s 1989 coup, it cannot be determined precisely whether the organization now supports or opposes the regime. Its positions have oscillated from participation in the government to opposing it. Similar to other political groups in Sudan, the Muslim Brotherhood suffers from internal rifts that began after its spokesperson Hassan al-Turabi reconciliation with then-President Nimeiri through “National Reconciliation” in 1977. Its membership has since divided into several blocs, each with divergent attitudes towards the current regime.

Further complicating the role that Sudan’s organized opposition plays in the protests, al-Bashir is able to rely on the country’s armed opposition movements as an ethnic-scaremonger in his rhetoric in order to bolster support. Though these armed groups in Darfur to the west and the Blue Nile state to the south hardly represent danger to the regime, al-Bashir has historically presented himself as the sole protector of Arabs in these regions.

The fissures within the opposition have made it difficult for a single person or faction to "lead" the street and crystallize its demands into specific issues that can be negotiated with the government. Instead, the chants of demonstrators often calling for the toppling of al-Bashir are creating pressure on the government while simultaneously crystalizing al-Bashir’s supporters around him.

Mapping the Potential Outcomes of the Street Protests

The complexities of Sudanese politics suggest that a number of scenarios may unfold in response to the ongoing protests:

In the first scenario, one of Sudan’s top generals may move to oust al-Bashir and take control of the government in a palace coup. There are two individuals well-positioned to take such an action. First, Chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Kamal Abdul-Maarouf became a household name in Sudan after his role in liberating the oil-rich city of Heglig on the southern border after weeks of occupation by South Sudan in April 2012. He is known for his discipline and control within the army. There are suspicions that Abdul-Maarouf played a role in the government-reported failed coup attempt by Brigadier Wad Ibrahim in November 2012, suggesting a willingness to replace al-Bashir.

The second candidate for a potential coup is General Salah Qosh, head of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), who headed the security apparatus for five years before being ousted by al-Bashir and implicated by the government in the November 2012 coup attempt. While the president surprised everyone in 2018 by bringing Qosh back as head of the NISS, there are reasons to expect that Qosh’s loyalties to the president would not preclude a future coup attempt given the right circumstances.

If one of these two men makes a successful move to overthrow the president, their subsequent government is more likely to follow the model of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s consolidation of power after mass protests rather than that of former Sudanese president Field Marshal Suwar al-Dahab. Though al-Dahab staged a coup in 1985, his subsequent Transitional Military Council transferred power over to elected civilian leadership—Sadiq al-Mahdi—after overseeing democratic elections.

Alternatively, al-Bashir could himself transfer power to another leader within al-Bashir’s National Congress Party in order to technically remove himself from the presidency without giving up all control. A likely candidate is the current Prime Minister Bakri Hassan Saleh because of his political proximity to al-Bashir. Even in this choice al-

Bashir has limited options, as it is inconceivable that he would hand over power to the opposition wings inside the ruling party. These include the wing of former First Vice President Ali Osman Taha or that of the founder of Sudan's NISS Nafie Ali Nafie. Al-Bashir cannot rely on either of these political factions to ensure a safe exit for him and his family.

But this scenario is linked to regional and international circumstances. For al-Bashir to step down voluntarily there must be international pressure for this outcome—as in the case of Mubarak's ouster in Egypt—a sentiment that is currently lacking on the international stage. Regionally, al-Bashir has insulated his position through foreign policy. By entering the Yemen war in support of the Saudi and UAE position, al-Bashir has secured the likely support of these governments. By giving the strategic island of Suakin to Turkey in March 2018, he put himself in the good graces of Erdogan. Given that Sudan also operates as a safety valve against illegal immigration to Europe, it is unlikely that there will be an international decision forcing his departure.

With a kind of tacit international support for the current regime and the character of al-Bashir himself, a third scenario of persistence seems an equally valid option, in spite of domestic pressures to resign. So far, al-Bashir denies the existence of any serious problems—though he has made token concessions by pledging an unspecified increase in—and characterizes the current events as a plot to be overcome. By holding on, al-Bashir is betting on the fragmentation of opposition forces and their inability to continue mobilizing in order to maintain his control.

For its part, the opposition is betting on the fact that the anger of the people will continue and even if the current uprising subsides, the people's anger will soon be ignited again. The leaders of the uprising believe that once a point is reached where the state is completely paralyzed, al-Bashir will not have any other options but to leave.

The complexity of the Sudanese scene is increasing daily, with the situation increasingly in the hands of the people on the street without substantive leadership from Sudan's traditional opposition forces. Though al-Bashir may succeed in circumventing or quashing the uprising, current indicators show that his survival in power is no longer guaranteed. Even if the current uprising phases out, it would now be very difficult to amend the constitution in anticipation of Sudan's announced 2020 elections. Given that an amendment is needed for al-Bashir to stay past his current two-term limit, the current protests are likely to have an impact on al-Bashir's tenure in power one way or another.



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