

Sudan: Prospects for Democracy

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13 March 2019

Overview

1. This memo examines the prospects for a democratic transition in Sudan. Almost three months into a period of sustained popular protest, that began on 19 December, and following the State of Emergency (SoE) declared on 22 February, it covers both domestic and regional political dynamics.
2. The protests reflected the deep disenchantment with the rule of President Omar al Bashir himself, and secondarily the National Congress Party (NCP). A very social spectrum has been represented. The protests have been extraordinarily sustained and widespread. However, the protesters' demands have not unlocked a process of democratization within the regime.
3. Pres. Bashir's declaration of a SoE reflected conflicts within the regime itself, especially between the army and a fractious array of Islamists, many of whom are associated with the NCP and the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). The key figure in the latter is the head of NISS, Gen. Salah Abdalla 'Gosh'.
4. Pres. Bashir is making plans for a transition in power, and has promoted Gen. Awad Ibn Auf Mohamed as his preferred successor. He is focused on consolidating the army, both as the institution central to national security and also as his power base and guarantor.
5. The current political dynamics have a regional dimension, reflecting the rivalries among Middle Eastern powers. Egypt is the key state backing Khartoum. These rivalries are a major factor in determining Sudan's political trajectory and could be a cause of instability. The wider international community are largely bystanders.
6. The viability of any democratic transition depends heavily on an economic upturn.
7. The African Union is best-placed to lead an initiative for a negotiated transition.

The Dynamics of the Protests

8. The protests that began across Sudanese cities in December have a very broad social composition. They reflect the deep discontent with the current government. Their protesters are focused on Pres. Bashir individually, demanding that he step down. Modest economic packages have not mollified the protester. The opposition parties have neither planned nor led the protests and are rallying to the cause, but leadership for the popular uprising is only slowly emerging. The prospects for the popular agenda gaining political traction depend on the opposition leadership developing a programme that can both reflect the energy of the public and be compatible with the interests in stability and a managed transition of the regime powerbrokers, especially the army.

9. As with Sudan's previous histories of civil resistance, the protesters have expressed sympathy of provincial rebels and their anger at the government's inability to find a political solution to these wars. (In 1964 and 1985 it was southern Sudan, today it is Darfur and Southern Kordofan.) However, despite some of the rebel leaders' claims, there appears to be no organic link between the insurgencies and the protests.

10. The protesters include a very broad coalition in Sudanese society. The leaders include professional groups (which have traditionally been the vanguard of civil uprisings), students and youth, significant sections of the Islamic movement, and veterans of the old opposition parties (Umma Party, Communist Party and others). Some of the veteran political leaders (notably Sadiq al Mahdi) have called for a compromise that would allow Pres. Bashir to leave gracefully; the rank-and-file of the protesters are taking a much tougher position. The extent to which the protests are sustained and prevail, depends closely on the coordination between the younger leaders of the uprising and the established leaders of the opposition. Another important factor is that many of the professionals leading the protests, and the parents of the younger protesters, have close social and professional ties to individual army officers. For the time being, this is a contributor to restraint by the security services. Insofar as there is a prospect of a managed transition, much depends on relations between these individuals and the army.

11. The protests have been met with repression, as would be expected. What is perhaps surprising is the relatively low number of fatalities despite twelve weeks of demonstrations, indicating that the security forces have used restraint. Officers of NISS and non-uniformed security agents are responsible for almost all of the reported incidents of sniping, beating and torture. Some within the regime claim that there are agents provocateurs among the protesters, planted by NISS, and that this is part of an underhand plan to use the protests and casualties to discredit Pres. Bashir to facilitate a NISS attempt to seize power.

12. The protests provide the background for the political crisis that is engulfing the regime. In the context of the impending expiry of Pres. Bashir's final term in office in April 2020 (under current constitutional provisions), the protests have ignited a power struggle over the succession. It is that power struggle that explains the SoE.

The Powerbrokers within the Regime

13. For thirty years, Pres. Bashir's power base is within the army, and this has become more pronounced over the last decade. Pres. Bashir has been particularly attentive to the military hierarchy, from the chief of staff down to the NCO level, and has ably utilized his encyclopaedic knowledge of individuals to ensure that every member of the officer corps feels that he has access to the president, who in turn has his interests at heart. Pres. Bashir has a well-established reputation for protecting his subordinates in the army, and all are confident that he will play according to a set of rules that excludes actions such as execution and handing over Sudanese to foreign authorities. This means that, whatever their wider agenda for Sudan, all members of the officer corps in particular and the political elite in general are personally comfortable with Pres. Bashir. There is no other senior figure in the regime who commands this confidence. Senior army officers also stick with Pres. Bashir because they are fearful of accountability (domestic and international) for the abuses perpetrated during the various civil wars.

14. The regime has been thoroughly coup-proofed, partly by careful design and partly because it emerged from a coalition of groups, each of which had its own financial and military power base. These factions have long been in an unstable balance. Over the years, in response to provincial insurgencies, paramilitaries have proliferated so that the security sector is vast, expensive, and complex. Pres. Bashir is at the centre of this web.

15. Pres. Bashir's fundamental problem is that he has established a political system that only he can run. This poses a huge problem for engineering a smooth succession. Five years ago he promoted Gen. Bakri Mohamed Saleh, one of the surviving members of the 1989 Revolutionary Command Council and a loyal friend, as his chosen successor. But Gen. Bakri did not have the required skills to run the political machine. Following the declaration of the SoE, Pres. Bashir replaced Gen. Bakri with Gen. Awad Ibn Auf Mohamed as his Vice President and preferred successor. Gen. Ibn Auf has some impressive credentials. He is a former head of Military Intelligence, and a classmate of President Abdel Fatah al Sisi in the Egyptian military academy. But he will face the same challenges as any successor to Pres. Bashir, namely that he (a) does not have the unique skillset of his predecessor and (b) he does not have the well-established reputation for protecting his subordinates.

16. The biggest and closest rival to the army is NISS, and its director, Gen. Salah Gosh. NISS has a military capability in the capital that is comparable to the army. (It famously took the lead in repelling the attack by the Justice and Equality Movement in 2008, leaving the army sidelined.) Salah Gosh has an intelligence capability and network that is second only to Bashir's. However, he does not command the same confidence among the political elite and officer corps. He is also widely seen as compromised by his links with the UAE.

17. The Islamist movement is continuing its slow process of fragmentation. Following the near-calamitous 1999 split, the NCP reconstituted around the patronage capabilities offered by oil boom money. As would be expected in a political marketplace, the oligopoly is only as cohesive as the political finance, and as this has dried up, the NCP has lost its unity. Some prominent Islamists have joined the active opposition (e.g. Ghazi Salah el Din). Others have abandoned the government and form an independent group or groups. Some are aligned with NISS (which is thoroughly inter-penetrated with some elements of the NCP). Following the SoE, Pres. Bashir stepped aside from the NCP and appointed an acting chairman. He chose Ahmed Haroun, one of the most capable organizers and administrators. This holds out the possibility of making a smaller NCP more effective, while also shifting the focus of public political attention to a reform process within the NCP, so that Pres. Bashir himself is not the sole focus of public discontent.

The State of Emergency and the Prospects for a Transition

18. The SoE has the effect of (a) strengthening the army, with respect to the NCP and civil administration; (b) weakening NISS, and especially making Salah Gosh appear to be an aspiring putschist; and (c) allowing Pres. Bashir to scapegoat the NCP.

19. Pres. Bashir's trade-off has been that he has suspended his attempt to run for another presidential term through amending the constitution, and has put his faith in senior army officers to manage a transition. The steps towards a transition are not irrevocable: Pres. Bashir has cards to play should he decide that the risks of leaving office are more than he is ready to tolerate.

20. The most obvious requirement for a successful transition to a post-Bashir era is a soft landing for the President himself. He needs to be safe from domestic enemies and from the International Criminal Court. Broadly speaking, the opposition recognizes this. They see the issue of Sudan as bigger than that of a single individual, and regret the paralysis brought to the democratization process by the ICC.

21. Success in the transitional process depends on four additional factors, namely: (a) creating a sufficiently robust pact among the regime powerbrokers; (b) an economic

recovery; (c) managing the proliferating security sector; and (d) support (or at least non-interference) from Middle Eastern powers.

22. *A pact among the powerbrokers.* This is Pres. Bashir's priority, and if anyone can construct a working cabal from the senior ranks of the existing regime, it is he. To do this successfully he needs money: a political budget sufficiently large to buy in those who are drifting away.

23. *Economic recovery.* Some of the preconditions for economic recovery are in place, including a gradual normalization of relations with the U.S. and the lifting of sanctions, an increase in oil production in South Sudan with associated revenue from the pipeline, and good relations with Middle Eastern neighbours. However, levels of corruption and the use of funds to support political networks (including the army, security agencies and paramilitaries, see below) that the benefits of any economic upturn have not translated into either an improvement for the general population or a central political budget sufficient for reconsolidating central authority. These conditions are not likely to change while Pres. Bashir remains in power.

24. Past democratic transitions have foundered amid economic chaos. In order to achieve the kind of economic recovery needed for democratization (as well as meeting basic needs of people), international donors will need to adopt a strategic and coordinated plan. Elements of this include agreement on a recovery plan supported by the Bretton Woods Institutions and coordinated political financial contributions by Middle Eastern patrons.

25. *Managing the security sector.* One element in this is NISS, which is potentially the single largest threat to any transition. Whether inside or outside the process, NISS can sabotage it. The NISS leadership conducts its own parallel foreign relations including with Middle Eastern neighbours. Other elements within the security apparatus are comparable though less powerful.

26. The second element is the multiplicity of paramilitaries, especially in the provinces. These have grown through an ad hoc but relentless process of accretion. Typically, the government empowers an irregular militia to conduct a counter-insurgency on the cheap. That militia then becomes a potential (sometimes real) threat to its masters. The government response is to incorporate it into the formal security structure as a paramilitary, giving salaries to its fighters and ranks to its leaders. Over time, the high command hopes, the newly-legitimized paramilitary group will become less of a security threat and after that less of a financial burden, as its members are slowly demobilized. But it has proven easier to expand the security sector than to contract it. Some of the stratagems used to keep the paramilitaries occupied also pose their own dangers. For

example, the deployment of the Rapid Support Forces to Yemen, paid by Saudi Arabia, has led to discontent in the ranks, and has also created a direct line of communication and potential clientage between RSF commanders and Saudi patrons.

27. While the army remains united and powerful, the perils of the bloated and fragmented security sector are manageable. If the army were not to be in a position to dominate, the perils of armed conflict would loom. However, there is no evident plan for a long-term solution to the problems of the security sector.

Sudan within the Middle East Dynamics

28. Sudan is entangled in Middle Eastern power politics. Pres. Bashir has a record of retaining a relative degree of autonomy vis-à-vis Middle Eastern countries, keeping lines open to as many as possible at the same time, and playing them off against one another. By the same token, none of the Middle Eastern countries are ready to invest major resources in the Sudanese regime, knowing it will not be a reliable client state. All know, however, that Pres. Bashir knows the rules of the regional game and will stay within the red lines, and so they are more comfortable with him remaining in power than with an unmanaged transition.

29. Egypt has emerged as the most sympathetic and supportive Middle Eastern actor, and Pres. Bashir has consolidated his links with Pres. Al-Sisi. Pres. Bashir's current strategy of consolidating power in the army and weakening the NCP, including the Islamists, has obvious parallels with Egypt. The rapprochement between Ethiopia and Egypt means that Sudan is no longer in the uncomfortable position of having to equivocate on the Nile Waters issue. Sudan's links to certain Libyan factions are useful for Egypt.

30. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were successful in pressing Sudan to cut its ties to Iran, but not in abandoning its links with Qatar and Turkey. They were important in making Sudan more palatable in Washington DC. They have strong and growing security interests in the Red Sea, and have strong ties to leading figures in different parts of the security apparatus (RSF, NISS). Pres. Bashir suspects that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been plotting to see him removed and replaced by an individual more closely aligned with them.

31. Qatar continues to have strong links to the Islamist movement in Sudan and as such, continuing ties. Many senior Qatari intelligence officers are Sudanese by origin. Turkey has strengthened ties with Sudan as part of its return to the former Ottoman lands, and is building a naval base at Suakin. Pres. Bashir does not fully trust the Qatari and Turkish agendas but nonetheless finds their presence and their resources useful.

32. Pres. Bashir was the first head of state to visit Syria since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. This was undoubtedly welcomed by Russia and was probably quietly appreciated by the Gulf States and Turkey. It also signaled Pres. Bashir's capacity to be ahead of the regional political game.

33. The rivalrous agendas among Middle Eastern players in Sudan could potentially cancel one another out, creating space for a Sudanese-led transition. However, more likely is that these rivalries will foment instability.

Sudan in Africa

34. Sudan is the broker and guarantor of the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCISS), which is constructed as an elaborate share out of posts and resources among South Sudan's political and security elite. This is a major reason for European and American support for the status quo, or a managed transition, in Sudan. While all observers are fearful that the R-ARCISS is fragile and few expect that it will lead to democratization, there is nothing better in immediate prospect. For that reason, Pres. Bashir is given the benefit of the doubt.

35. Sudan has good relations with all its sub-Saharan African neighbours, albeit only on a tactical basis with Eritrea and Uganda. The recent hosting of the peace talks for the Central African Republic has advertised Sudan's value as a peacemaker. That has also drawn attention to Sudan's alignment with Russia.

36. The African Union has the potential to be the most impartial and credible interlocutor in Sudan, based on its legitimacy as a regional multilateral player, its norms and principles that include constitutional democracy, and its history of engagement.

Prospects and Scenarios

37. The following are possible scenarios, to be considered:

- *A consensual transition*: with outside facilitation (for which the AU is best placed). This would include a phased process whereby Pres. Bashir presides over a negotiated transition, leaving power with appropriate guarantees; establishing a Transitional Government and organizing a constitutional convention; agreement on the role of the army and the security sector; and measures for stabilizing the economy;
- *A stalemate*: the status quo of a weakened president who hangs on to power because no-one can see a preferable alternative; which is only a short-term option;

- *A military takeover*: this could be with the implicit consent of Pres. Bashir or could be a straightforward coup, possibly in response to an escalation of the current protests; each scenario has attendant risks;
- *A slide into fragmentation*: with the prospects of armed conflict, militant extremism and fractions of the security sector acting independently and obtaining external sponsorship.

38. The determinants of the different outcomes depend critically on the state of the economy and the positions taken by Middle Eastern powers.

39. Pres. Bashir is the key figure in this situation. He has the capacity to engineer a workable transition, which would be his legacy. He also has the capacity to block or subvert any such transition, or indeed to set Sudan on a course in which the destination is armed conflict or chaos.



This material has been funded in part by UK aid from the UK government; however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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