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# The Fall of al-Bashir: Mapping Contestation Forces in Sudan

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Protests in Khartoum calling for regime change © EPA-EFE/STR



What is the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) anyway, perplexed commentators and news anchors on Sudan's government-aligned television channels asked repetitively as if bound by a spell? An anchor on the BBC Arabic Channel described the SPA as "mysterious" and "bewildering". Most were asking about the apparently unfathomable body that has taken the Sudanese political scene by surprise since December 2018 when the ongoing wave of popular protests against President Omar al-Bashir's 30-year authoritarian rule began.

The initial spark of protests came from Atbara, a dusty town pressed between the Nile and the desert some 350km north of the capital, Khartoum. A crowd of school pupils, market labourers and university students raged against the government in response to an abrupt tripling of the price of bread as a result of the government's removal of wheat subsidies. Protestors in several towns across the country set fire to the headquarters of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and stormed local government offices and Zakat Chamber<sup>1</sup> storehouses taking food items in a show of popular sovereignty.

## Territorial separation and economic freefall

Since the independence of South Sudan in 2011, Sudan's economy has been experiencing a freefall as the bulk of its oil and government revenues withered away almost overnight. Currency depreciation, hyperinflation and dwindling foreign currency reserves coupled with the rise in the prices of good and a banking crisis with severe cash supply shortages, have all contributed to the economic crisis. The government responded with a new round of austerity measures, cutting expenditures on social services and subsidies on fuel, electricity and wheat.

When popular protests and insurgencies against entrenched authoritarian regimes rocked the Arab world in 2011, Sudan was consumed by the separation of South Sudan under international supervision.<sup>2</sup> The politics of divorce were expectedly complex and culminated in the renewal of warfare in Sudan's borders with South Sudan. Fighting resumed in Sudan's South Kordofan and the Blue Nile after a brief interregnum of peace and a civil war engulfed the newly independent South Sudan as the two capitals, Khartoum and Juba, jockeyed for influence.



Sudan's first post-separation budget included a set of austerity measures. In September 2013 the government was confronted and brutally crashed a series of riots in Khartoum protesting increases in fuel and bread prices. At least 185 protesters were killed in the mayhem, according to a 2014 joint report by Amnesty International and African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies.

With hindsight, the September 2013 events were a forerunner of the ongoing wave of popular protests against al-Bashir and his government. The new generation of protestors, mostly students and young professionals, eschewed the hierarchical structures of the established political parties and forged their own horizontal networks supported by the widespread use of the internet. Instead of identifiable ringleaders, groups such as *Girifna* (We are Fed Up), *Sharara* (Spark) and Change Now provided the acephalous protests of September 2013 with loud voices and powerful images amplified by the global reach of social media.

## The Islamists between two dictators

At the time, President Bashir dismissed claims that the fever of the Arab Spring had infected the country, arguing that Sudan had already bypassed that stage. In a way, he was right. Sudan's Arab Spring moment was arguably the intifada of April 1985 that ushered in the army coup which ended the 16-year dictatorship of President Gaafar Nimeiry and introduced a brief period of parliamentary democracy between 1986 and 1989.

Nimeiry, a Nasser-style autocrat, switched allegiance from the communist bloc to the USA and became Washington's man in the Horn of Africa. After accumulating formidable debts as a result of failed state-led development megaprojects, his government was forced to undertake a raft of economic "reforms" designed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to liberalise the economy and drastically reduce government expenditures. These "reforms" incorporated all the familiar prescriptions of the neoliberal model: currency devaluation, subsidy cuts, privatisation of public enterprises, and reduction of social spending (Gurdon, 1991).

Nimeiry did not survive the IMF reforms. Popular anger at austerity in Khartoum, a city strained by streams of rural migrants fleeing war in the south<sup>3</sup> and famine in



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the west,<sup>4</sup> brought his rule to an end after only two weeks of massive protests in April 1985. While Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Nimeiry's major regional ally, had managed to crush the 1977 riots against austerity in Egypt and win the favour of the Islamists, he was later killed at the hands of the very Islamists he sought to instrumentalise to tame the masses opposed to his economic model. In Sudan, Nimeiry forged a similar alliance with the Sudanese Islamic Movement led by Hassan al-Turabi.

Sudan's Islamists exploited their alliance with Nimeiry to position a new corps of aspiring educated cadres, mostly from Sudan's provincial towns, in state institutions in preparation for a bid for power. The promise of an Islamic renaissance provided this ambitious middle class with a novel political grammar of opposition to Sudan's ruling classes. Eventually, the Islamic Movement won the state with the help of the military in 1989, creating an autocracy of an Islamic blend.

While Islamist movements in the countries of the Arab Spring were, three decades later, the carriers of opposition to autocratic rule and symptomatic urban anger against neoliberal transformation (Joya, 2011), Islamists in the Sudanese government implemented the very "reforms" that Nimeiry was not able, politically, to carry through. Their interpretation of the state was wholly congruent with the neoliberal model (Marchal & Ahmed, 2010). The state they recreated operated as a driver of privatisation and economic liberalisation that regulates economic activity in conformity with the interests of big business, popularises a consumption and competition culture, rewards the few winners and controls the many losers through a combination of disciplinary legislation<sup>5</sup> and brute force.<sup>6</sup>

For the past 30 years, opposition to the rule of Sudan's Islamists came from two expected quarters: the old ruling class,<sup>7</sup> displaced by the Islamist takeover, and the armed movements in Sudan's peripheries – South Kordofan, the Blue Nile and Darfur. The first has pursued a self-defeating policy of return to the *ancien régime* of patrician rule, the socio-economic foundations of which have long been eroded. The second has repeatedly attempted and failed to forge a broad alliance of Sudan's marginalised non-Arabic speaking peoples with a view to ending the system of racial and social privilege that sustains the dominance of the elite from the riverine heartland of the country.



The Islamists' response to this dual challenge has been a largely successful policy of co-optation by integrating elite members of the old establishment parties<sup>8</sup> and the peripheries<sup>9</sup> into the ruling class. The demands of government and the realpolitik of survival against regional and international odds were key in al-Bashir's turn away from the ideological zeal of Islamic renaissance to a more pragmatic *modus operandi* of co-optation and patronage. To secure this move, he got rid of Hassan al-Turabi,<sup>10</sup> the veteran leader of the Islamic Movement, and subsequently most of the movement's eminent politicians.<sup>11</sup>

### “Freedom, Peace and Justice”: a rallying cry

For the young women and men protesting on Sudan's streets today, most of whom come from professional, student, and middle-class backgrounds, political Islam remains the ideology of the enemy in power. It is the *koz* (meaning scoop in Arabic), a Sudanese term used to symbolise the Islamists' greed, that the protesters want to stamp out. Robbed of the moral and ideological traction of “Islam” as an oppositionist idiom by the very bankruptcy of the Islamist project in government, Sudan's protesters are faced with the challenge of inventing an alternative political grammar to articulate their demands. So far, their rallying cry has been based on vague notions of “freedom, peace and justice”. Their critics in government media often poke in this political blind spot demanding the articulation of a programme of government beyond captivating slogans.

Indeed, one reason for the success of the SPA as a vehicle of political mobilisation against al-Bashir and his government is its perceived political innocence. The young women and men who answer the SPA's regular calls for protest do so because it reflects their anger against entrenched corruption, cronyism and government inefficiency but also because it mirrors their frustration at the failures of the political class across the spectrum. As an organisation, the SPA claims no political orientation and that it speaks a universal functional language of freedoms and rights to which every citizen is entitled, and promises a way out from the clutches of autocracy. Interestingly, its mobilisation rhetoric derives largely from the heritage of Sudan's *effendiya*<sup>12</sup> nationalism, the working ideology of the small



class of educated Sudanese. The latter were mostly Muslim Arabic speakers from the riverine heartland who served as junior clerks and administrators under Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule and inherited the colonial state (Sharkey, 2007).

This appropriation of the Graduates Congress<sup>13</sup> nationalist language could be interpreted as a discursive manoeuvre meant to revive a fantasy of national cohesion from an imagined past. It is, however, exactly this poetic but narrow nationalism of the *effendiya* class that failed to imagine a political home for Sudan's many peoples and is blamed for the hastened decay of Sudan post-colony in raging civil wars (Harir & Tvedt, 1994). In contradistinction to this notion of organic national unity, Sudan's many disenfranchised had launched alternative nationalisms of the working class (Sikainga, 2010), of the women's movement (Ibrahim, 2010), and of oppressed nationalities (Garang, 1987).

## A free ride for the political opposition forces

Beyond mobilisation, the obfuscation of political conflict in the glorification of the nation serves a precise function, that of allowing the ever-quarrelsome opposition forces to ride the wave of mass political engagement generated by the SPA as alliance partners. Sudan's competing opposition coalitions, the Sudan Call and the National Consensus Forces as well as a faction of the Democratic Unionist Party opposed to the alliance of the mainstream party with the ruling NCP, have co-signed the SPA's Freedom and Change Declaration.

The Sudan Call alliance was launched in 2014 in Addis Ababa as an opposition platform allowing Sadiq al-Mahdi's *Umma* Party and other non-armed political actors to partner with the armed movements of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF). The primary purpose of the Sudan Call was to demonstrate a unity of purpose in the mediation process led by the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel for Sudan and South Sudan between the Sudanese government and its many opponents. Established in 2011, the SRF joined the main Darfur armed movements, the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement led by Abd al-Wahid Mohamed Nur, the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement led by Minni Minawi and the Justice and Equality Movement and the Sudan People's Liberation



Army/Movement in North Sudan (SPLA/M-N).

Due to rivalry over chairmanship of the coalition, by 2014 the SRF was split between the Darfur armed movements, on one side, and the SPLA/M-N and its allies, on the other. The SPLA/M-N itself suffered a leadership dispute that led to its division in 2017 between a majority in the Nuba Mountains/South Kordofan led by Abd al-Aziz al-Hilu with the declared aim of achieving self-determination for the region and a minority in the Blue Nile led by Malik Agar who maintain a nation-wide agenda.

Divisions over strategy and competition over leadership also pitted non-armed opposition actors against each other. Sadiq al-Mahdi, the leader of the *Umma* Party, parted ways with the National Consensus Forces (NCF), an opposition coalition launched in 2010, and joined, beside his party, the Communist Party, Hassan al-Turabi's Popular Congress Party, the opposition Sudanese Congress Party and a list of smaller Baathist and Nasserite groups. Al-Mahdi was not happy with a subordinate position in the NCF under the chairmanship of Farouq Abu Issa, a veteran politician with leftist inclinations, and soon sought a route out. Tired of the NCF, al-Turabi's PCP joined President al-Bashir's "national dialogue" process announced in 2014 to eventually become a partner in government.

With the armed movements as his allies, Sadiq al-Mahdi finally became chairman of an opposition umbrella – the Sudan Call – in March 2018. Although a signatory to the Sudan Call, the NCF accused its allies of subservience to an internationally backed "soft-landing" agenda of reconciliation with the government as part of a managed transition, walked out of the coalition and called for "regime change" as its only goal. As to the opposition Sudanese Congress Party, it preferred the company of the Sudan Call partners to the NCF, now reduced to the Communist Party and its Baathist and Nasserite friends. In the throes of a leadership crisis since the death of its veteran secretary general Mohamed Ibrahim Nugud in 2012, the Communist Party under its new leader, Mohamed Mukhtar al-Khateeb, purged elements it accused of toying with the idea of a "soft-landing" ahead of its sixth party conference in 2016 to noble isolation at the helm of the NCF.

## A union umbrella and a political agent:





### the success formula of SPA

No wonder then, that the emergence of the rather obscure SPA was received with popular acclaim in a political theatre riddled by incessant squabbling. The SPA was established in 2016 as an alliance of three professional organs: the Sudan Doctors Central Committee, the Sudan Journalists Network, and the Alliance of Democratic Lawyers. The first is a strike coordination committee that emerged out of a successful 2016 doctors strike action. The second was established in 2012 as a representative organ of Sudanese journalists opposed to the government-aligned Sudan Journalist Union. The third grew out of an electoral list of opposition lawyers that regularly competes for the leadership of the government-aligned Sudanese Bar Association.

In August 2018 the SPA held a poorly attended press conference in Khartoum to unveil a study on the minimum wage on the background of the depreciation of the national currency and spiralling hyperinflation. Speakers at the press conference included Mohamed Yusif Ahmed al-Mustafa, one of a few veteran northern senior members of the ancestor SPLA/M. After the independence of South Sudan, he remained aloof of the SPLA/M-N but took the unexpected move of siding with Abd al-Aziz al-Hilu in the 2017 split of the SPLA/M-N. Another speaker was Mohamed Naji al-Assam, a young doctor known for his engagement in strike actions and affiliation with a faction of the Democratic Unionist Party opposed to the alliance with the ruling NCP. Al-Assam and al-Mustafa would appear again to speak for the SPA and are today under arrest.

The SPA announced a plan to submit its minimum wage proposal to the National Assembly in a mass procession, but the eruption of protests in Atbara, Gedaref and other provincial towns in Sudan raised the bar of political action. The SPA responded with the announcement of the “Freedom and Change Declaration” on the eve of Sudan’s independence anniversary on 1 January 2019 calling for the unconditional departure of the regime of President al-Bashir and the formation of a “National Transitional Government”.

The SPA captivated the political imagination of Sudan’s busy social media. Its success among the Sudanese diaspora is a case in point. It provided anchor and agency to broad segments of young women and men wishing to live out their





political identity as Sudanese citizens. Groups of activists from different professions – university lecturers, veterinary doctors, engineers, health inspectors, plastic artists and others – formed their own associations along the SPA model to join the Freedom and Change Declaration.

The dual formula of SPA, as an aspiring trade union umbrella and a political agent, proved its success. In this regard, it resembles older political organisations in Sudan, namely the Syndicated Front, which spearheaded the 1964 October revolution that ended the rule of Sudan's military ruler General Abboud, and the Trade Unions Association, which played a pivotal role in the April 1985 intifada that toppled the regime of President Nimeiry. There are, however, critical differences in content that override the resemblance in form. The 1964 Syndicates Front and the 1985 Trade Unions Association operated in a socio-economic field where the government was the primary employer of the educated professionals who sought to challenge it through strike action and popular mobilisation. Both organisations could draw on the support of militant labour organisations, such as the Sudan Railway Workers Union, strategically positioned to paralyse a cash crop economy. They could also substantiate their representative claims through electoral procedures in their constituent trade unions and professional associations.

The actors of the SPA, in contradistinction, are primarily drawn from the free professions. Capitalist penetration under the aegis of Sudan's Islamists transformed Sudan's labour market in favour of commercial enterprises. Because of the commoditisation of health and education and the privatisation of public assets, employers in these sectors multiplied and private interests emerged that collide with sectoral strike actions. Government employees as well as employees in the banking, industry or communications sectors, who could arguably overturn this unfavourable balance, are yet to develop their trade union platforms and join the SPA's repeated calls for a general strike. By its very composition, the SPA is somewhat removed from the concerns and challenges of Sudan's many subsistence farmers, small peasantry, agricultural labour, the many artisan miners scavenging for gold in deserts and valleys far and wide, urban small producers and the masses of the urban poor.

## Forces inhibiting change?

In this moment of revolutionary crisis in Sudan, an array of forces are obstructing change in the country. These are made of security men and military officers, privatised militias, big businesses and food importers, bankers and financiers, large landowners, preachers, and bureaucrats. They all share interests in maintaining the current status quo. It is no surprise, therefore, that President al-Bashir's response to months of protests was to declare a nationwide state of emergency on 22 February. He also, dissolved the government, replaced 10 state governors with military and security men and appointed a disciplinarian as deputy chairman of the ruling party with the authorities of the first officer. These steps amounted to an adjustment of the balance of forces in the ruling establishment in favour of the military/security apparatus with a view to winning new partners from the very ranks of the aggrieved professionals in support of a new "transitional" cabinet.

Sudan's continued protests have rightfully rekindled the spirit of the Arab Spring but also spurred the powerful counter-revolutionary forces of the region into action. In his many speeches since the start of protests, President al-Bashir made a point of thanking Egypt, Qatar, Russia and China for their support. The combination of these countries appears counter-intuitive but speaks to the composite character of the Sudanese regime, a military autocracy born out the capture of the state by a modern Islamic movement that ascribes to neoliberalism and employs a chauvinistic ideology grounded in the alleged supremacy of Sudan's Arabic-speaking Muslims over its many peoples. President al-Bashir's greatest surprise is the fact that resistance to his rule emanates today from close quarters, the very people he claims to defend against plotting rebels and international conspirators.

Protests intensified on 6 April, the anniversary of the peaceful protests that ousted Nimeiry, with thousands gathering near the army headquarters in Khartoum. Security services loyal to al-Bashir fired live ammunition, tear gas and rubber bullets on protesters, which killed dozens of protesters as well as army officers trying to protect them. The protests continued to call for the military leadership not to support al-Bashir and to set up a civilian transitional government. However,



the army responded only with half measures. While they deposed al-Bashir on 11 April, they also announced that a military council, headed Deputy President and Defence Minister General Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf, will run the country for the next two years but provided no details. The protesters rejected the move as a regime coup and vowed to “guard their revolution” and continue their demands. For now, Sudan’s transition is shrouded in uncertainty.

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## Endnotes

1. Zakat is a Muslim religious obligation and constitutes an annual tax of around 2.5% on wealth. A government-managed Zakat Fund was established in Sudan in 1980 on a voluntary basis. Zakat was made compulsory in 1984 with the establishment of the Zakat Chamber and further formalised with the Zakat Act of 1990.
2. A 2005 peace agreement between the government of Sudan and the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) ended Africa's longest war. The agreement granted the southern Sudanese the right of self-determination through a referendum and an overwhelming majority voted to separate from Sudan and form a separate country.
3. Sudan's second civil war commenced in 1983 with the rebellion of the Bor garrison in southern Sudan.
4. Severe drought struck Sudan's western regions Kordofan and Darfur in the years 1980-1984.
5. The Public Order Law (1992) is a disciplinary interpretation of Islamic sharia designed largely to control the urban poor through the imposition of a dress and behavioural code.
6. The Sudanese government employed warfare to dismantle subsistence agricultural systems in Sudan's distant peripheries – Darfur, South Kordofan and the Blue Nile – and subdue armed rebellions.
7. The *Umma* Party and the Democratic Unionist Party, both political vehicles of patrician families that lead two of Sudan's major religious formations, the *Ansar* and the *Khatmiyya*, respectively.
8. The mainstream Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) led by Mohamed Osman al-Mirghani, the *Khatimiyya* figurehead, signed a settlement pact with the government in 2003 and became a coalition partner of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) in 2012. The *Umma* Party led by Sadiq al-Mahdi, imam of the *Ansar*, remained officially in opposition. Sadiq al-Mahdi's eldest son and heir apparent, Abd al-Rahman, occupies the position of assistant to President Bashir since 2011. Another of Sadiq's sons, Bushra, is an officer in the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS).
9. The government signed several peace deals with rebel groups and breakaway factions of rebel groups from Darfur, such as the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement and the 2011 Doha Agreement for Peace in Darfur, and handed government positions to politicians and community leaders from marginalised population groups.
10. The fallout between the two took place in 1998-1999 leading to the fracture of the Islamic Movement. President Bashir continued to lead the ruling National Congress Party (NCP). Turabi, expelled from power, formed his own Popular Congress Party (PCP) and was accused of fomenting armed rebellion in Darfur. President Bashir and Turabi eventually reconciled in 2014 to initiate a 'national dialogue' process that allowed the PCP to join the ruling coalition led by the NCP.
11. Senior Islamists such as the former vice president Ali Osman Mohamed Taha, the former NCP strongman and deputy chairman Nafie Ali Nafie, the former oil minister Awad al-Jaz, the former foreign affairs minister Mustafa Osman Ismail, were laid off from executive offices and their authority in the ruling party curtailed. The NCP today operates as a corporate body that manages the interests of multiple stakeholders in the regime (businessmen, landowners, commercial agriculturalists, traditional tribal and native administration leaders) and is subservient to the political will of the president and the overarching authority of the military/security establishment.
12. (Turk.) educated bureaucrats; the term was used by British officials during the Anglo-Egyptian condominium to refer to the new class of educated Sudanese civil servants.
13. The Graduates General Congress was established in 1938 as an alumni association of Gordon Memorial College (which became the University of Khartoum after independence). It was initially involved in educational and social activities but soon developed into a nationalist platform and sought recognition from the British authorities as the representative of the Sudanese people. The allegiance of Congress members was split between the two patricians, Sayed Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi of the *Ansar* and Sayed Ali al-Mirghani of the *Khatmiyya*.



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