



Sudan's Spring: causes and consequences

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This Q&A is an explainer on the rapid political changes that have taken place in Sudan over the last month. All 4 contributors are close collaborators with the Rift Valley Institute. Questions were posed by Magnus Taylor, RVI's Senior Publications Manager. Alden Young and Naomi Pendle are co-directors of RVI's Sudan and South Sudan field course, held this year in Ethiopia. For more information [click here](#).

RVI: When Sudanese first took to the streets in late-2018 to protest against the Bashir regime these were often, somewhat erroneously, described as bread protests. To what extent have economic grievances driven the recent political changes?

Alden Young: In 2018 protests spread through Sudan as a result of a deepening economic crisis, which saw the sharp devaluation of the Sudanese pound and hyper-inflation. The black market for hard currency had grown considerably since the partial lifting of US sanctions in 2017, but this only led to increased financial and economic instability. This was felt by the Sudanese population as shortages of bread, fuel and medicines, not to mention their constantly escalating price. The anger sparked by inflation and shortages was not merely about economic hardships, but also aimed at the insensitivity and incompetence of the Sudanese regime in the face of suffering.

These economic grievances melded with longer standing demands for political change in Sudan. They came, in particular, from the long-suppressed trade unions and smaller opposition political parties. One of the notable features of the current protests has been the re-emergence of tendencies such as the Communist Party and the Republic Brothers that had been particularly persecuted by the Bashir regime. The grievances

of the professional classes have been supported by and magnified the influence of regional parties and armed movements. The extent to which the demands for change exceed the boundaries of the urban centres, such as Khartoum, can be seen in the large role played by Darfurians in the protests (often extremely violent) both in camps like Kalma and other cities in the region.

RVI: Following the removal of President Bashir and the formation of the Transitional Military Council, headed by General Burhan, who is now calling the shots in Khartoum? Is it the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), the protestors, or other powerful security groups such as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)?

Magdi el-Gizouli: The mass movement that emerged out of the political wasteland of the Bashir era is undoubtedly a new and surprising element in Sudan's political theatre. With the background of a grinding financial crisis, a protest movement that brought together salaried urban professionals and broad segments of the pauperized urban workforce, managed to force a not entirely stable restructuring of Sudan's ruling alliance.

In diagnostic terms, president Bashir's security committee—a permanent body joining commanders of all regular forces (army, security, RSF and police)—decided to surgically remove the old autocrat in a palace coup and offer the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) up for sacrifice. The balance of power within the security committee—now rebranded as the TMC—became obvious when the former defence minister and vice president, Awad Ibn Ouf, stepped down as its chairman. This was confirmed by the rise of Mohamed Hamdan Daglo 'Himeidti'—leader of the RSF—to its deputy chairman, which has made him the most serious single contender for power in Sudan.

The rise of Himeidti, from livestock merchant in northern Darfur, to militia leader, to statesman and ruler-to-be in the heart of the Nile valley, is a feat of historical cunning worthy of note. This event should direct attention towards the structural transformations that are threatening the basic assumptions of power in riverine Sudan. If precedent has any value, the last time a rural fighting force occupied Khartoum and decisively conditioned its politics was when the Abdullahi Tor Shain ('Ugly Bull'), the Khalifa or successor of the Mahdi, defeated the putschist plot of the Mahdi's relatives, the Ashraf, in 1891-1892 and consolidated power in his hands backed by the mighty Baggara. The Baggara army that carried the Khalifa Abdullahi to power in Omdurman was partially born out of the crisis of the nineteenth century slavery system, while Himeidti's private army is in many ways the product of the pastoral crisis in northern Darfur and Kordofan.

While observers of Sudan might miss the relevance of nineteenth century history for today's power struggles, for the actors themselves and the Sudanese at large, that history is very much alive and informs many of their judgements. How else is the loose political association that is emerging around the Bonapartist figure of Himeidti to be understood? So far, he has attracted into his orbit a line-up of political figures, including the former vice president Hasabo Mohamed Abd al-Rahman, the newspaper editor al-Sadiq al-Rizeigy, the University of Khartoum professor and civil society celebrity Mudawi Ibrahim and the former governor of Darfur Tijani al-Sese. The unifying factor in this association is its relative extraneousness to the network of social capital and privilege of the riverine heartland. Himeidti, today, is Sudan's most important gold and livestock merchant, the leader of a privatized army and the owner of three of Khartoum's daily newspapers, but still he is not the equal of the business families of Khartoum, the Bireirs, the Kartis, the Abdul Latifs or Nefeidis.

RVI: Does the elevation of Himeidti and the RSF, which has its origins in Darfur, mean that there is there likely to be a strengthening in the representation of Darfuris within Sudan's new political order?

Margie Buchanan-Smith: The elevation of Himeidti may mark a shift away from the domination of power by political elites from riverine Central Sudan. It is possible that Darfur

will be more strongly represented in the new political order. However, it is important to keep this in perspective. Himeidti and his RSF are mainly drawn from the Rizeigat tribe and it remains to be seen whether the many other Darfuri groups will have a say in the formation of the transitional government that is currently under negotiation. In particular, there is the question of how the Darfuri opposition movements and armed groups—mainly drawn from non-Arab ethnic groups—will be involved in the negotiations towards creating a new civilian government? Ethnicity has been a major fault-line in 16 years of violent conflict in Darfur and there are deep divisions in Darfuri society, associated with strongly-held grievances and distrust—atrocities and human rights abuses perpetrated by the RSF have fuelled some of these. Representation of Darfuris in Sudan's new political order means acknowledging and taking account of these divisions, ensuring that all sides are able to participate in a meaningful way. This could also be a first step towards negotiating a genuine peace agreement in Darfur that begins to address the root causes of the conflict.

RVI: How are outside actors, particularly the Gulf states and Egypt influencing events? What do they want and who are their key interlocutors within the cast of characters currently negotiating the post-Bashir political settlement?

Magdi el-Gizouli: According to Khartoum's rumour mills, when Bashir was informed in the early hours of 11 April that his days were over he shouted at the generals that this is a Saudi-Emirati plot executed by Himeidti and Salah Gosh (former director of the NISS) and coordinated by the Egyptian military intelligence. His suspicions are probably spot on, but they also actively ignore the thousands-upon-thousands of people who came together to reject his rule.

Himeidti's privatized army is fighting on behalf of the Saudis and Emiratis in Yemen and is arguably their most valuable asset in Sudan today. The three countries—Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt—all have an axe to grind against Islamic movements in the region and are more than happy to see the Islamic Movement purged from power in Sudan by the military-security establishment.

The qualifier here is that the Sudanese Islamic Movement, thanks to its long growth into the

state bureaucracy and the economy, has acquired the characteristics of a social class with a shared relationship to the means of production. In this process, political Islam has become a liability and many of Sudan's Islamists have parted ways with what was a winning oppositionist idiom to embrace a brand of neoliberalism with a Muslim face. Given the public rage against the Ingaz variant of Islamism, the 11 April coup might, paradoxically, come to the rescue of the very class that the Islamic movement had transformed into.

RVI: Does a new administration, in whatever form it emerges, have a better chance of reviving, or at least stabilizing, the Sudanese economy than the outgoing regime?

Alden Young: The transitional military council is hoping to continue and accelerate the Bashir regime's strategy of international rehabilitation. It hopes that this will be easier without the personal burden of the ICC-indicted former president. The potential of this strategy can be seen in the recent offers of financial and economic assistance to Sudan from the governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. For the last few years, these regimes have been supporting the reconciliation between Khartoum and Washington, which resulted in the partial lifting of sanctions. Khartoum hopes that this will result in the forgiving of part of Sudan's international debt, as well as economic assistance from the IMF and World Bank. However, this strategy appears so far to have only deepened the economic crisis in the country.

Should the demonstrators succeed in bringing about a civilian government and limiting the influence of the military regime in the transitional authority, the new regime will be forced to deal with the possibility of regional hostility on the part of their powerful neighbours such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This has the possibility of worsening the economic crisis in the country, at least in the short-term, particularly as Sudan is vulnerable to losing access to its external sources of hard currency, necessary for vital imports of petroleum, wheat and pharmaceuticals. However, such an outcome could begin the process of a restructuring of the Sudanese economy towards long-term stability.

RVI: How might the current political transition in Khartoum affect South Sudan, particularly the implementation of the 'revitalized' peace agreement (R-ARCSS)?

Naomi Pendle: In June 2018, pressure from Sudan's President Bashir on both the South Sudanese President Salva Kiir and his main political rival, Riek Machar, made an elite deal between them possible. This reduced fighting and, three months later, led to the signing of the R-ARCSS peace agreement. As Bashir was the driving force behind this agreement and Sudan its key guarantor, what happens in Khartoum has direct implications for the South Sudan peace deal. Following Bashir's departure, the lack of focused pressure from Sudan feels particularly acute as the date for the formation of a transitional government passes without major progress.

While the Sudanese leadership was being reconfigured in April, President Salva Kiir visited the UAE. This highlights the fact that other (more) powerful players may also have influence over peace and politics in South Sudan. If Middle Eastern players (who may see the benefits of access to southern labour, including military labour) become more direct actors in South Sudan's politics, sufficient external pressure for an elite deal may remain. Any new government in Khartoum will also benefit from the dividend of increased oil flows facilitated by southern peace. However, such a peace deal would not include, or require, the full implementation of R-ARCSS. The current reduction in fighting is based on a few key terms within the peace deal that benefit Kiir, Machar and other powerful players. The broader, aspirational arrangements of R-ARCSS do not need to be implemented to uphold this deal, even if it is useful to create a more general sense of legitimacy.

Beyond the implementation (or otherwise) of R-ARCSS, the fall of Bashir is also a strong reminder that even the most tactical, astute and long-serving leaders can be ousted from power by civic action. In one scenario, the success of protests in Khartoum could spur a South Sudanese opposition movement to organize against the country's elites. However, the country's conflicts have remade ethnic identities and created deep divides among the opposition, undermining the ability for a united, anti-government movement. Also, unlike in Khartoum, the professional class in

Juba is small and without a history of successful political action.

One notable feature of the protests in Sudan (so far) is how relatively non-violent they have been. This is largely due to the military's reluctance to fire on the protestors. For those leaders who construct a complex security arena—evident in both Sudan and South Sudan—this is an area of weakness. Managing a strong military and national intelligence service, that can compete against each other (including through inaction), is a job that requires great skill. It is one that ultimately proved too difficult even for President Bashir, who was a master of political management. In South Sudan, there is no guarantee that protests would be met with the same level of inaction visible in Khartoum, which could result in a much bloodier outcome.

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Credits

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