



Understanding Sudan's electoral system: Political campaigns

This briefing is part of RVI's Sudan Elections Project, a short-term study on the history of elections in the country. The project examines the different factors that have shaped the course and consequences of elections in Sudan, while drawing out lessons to inform the programming and advocacy work of those hoping to ensure a successful transition in Sudan. Research is based on analyses of election-related documents and interviews with polling and electoral commission staff, candidates, political party members, civil society organizations, and journalists.

After coming to power through a military coup in 1989, President Omar al-Bashir ruled Sudan for 30 years until he was removed in 2019 following a popular uprising. While Bashir is often referred to as a dictator and an autocrat, he oversaw many elections—in 2001, 2010, and 2015—at the head of the National Congress Party (NCP). However, these elections were designed and conducted in ways that guaranteed that Bashir and the NCP won them all. Understanding how this was achieved will be an important part of designing a new electoral system, which is one facet of Sudan's ongoing transitional process.

When thinking about elections in Sudan, an important area to focus on is campaigns, which have historically enabled incumbent parties to dominate the political space and stifle serious challenges. This briefing focuses on how election campaigns have been conducted in Sudan, with particular reference to the elections in 2010 and 2015. It is structured around three key questions:

1. How are election campaigns organized and run in rural and urban areas?
2. What regulations govern campaigns?
3. How is the media accessed by candidates?

How are election campaigns organized and run?

Political parties and their chosen candidates use campaigns, conducted in the days and weeks before elections, to present their positions on issues that they hope will appeal to voters. The time allocated for campaigns varies, but they generally last several weeks, depending on local political conditions. In the 2010 elections, campaigns lasted for almost two months.

Candidates use a variety of means, including images or symbols, to convey their campaign messages to voters. While campaigns generally have some focus on party policies or manifestos, religious and/or tribal affiliations are also crucial factors and are often more relevant than any specific policy platform.

During the early years of Sudan's electoral history—1960s and 1970s—media coverage was limited. As a result, election campaigns were conducted conventionally with candidates and/or their representatives physically moving around to meet people, especially in rural Sudan. In urban areas, candidates have tended to use cars with amplifiers to broadcast their election programmes.

With education limited in the countryside during the 1960s and 1970s, election authorities assigned a certain symbol to each candidate to make sure that illiterate voters could identify different candidates. The use of symbols continues. These are normally based on familiar objects from the local environment, such as a tree, cow, lorry, flashlight, goat or stick. These symbols are typed or printed on cloth or paper—they are often now made into coloured stickers—and stuck on cars or lorries that travel around the constituency.

In the period that followed Sudan's independence, the two most important political parties were the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)—Sudan's two main sectarian parties—while the Sudanese Communist Party was largely confined to a few urban-based educated groups. The Umma Party historically won elections in Darfur and the White Nile areas, while the Democratic Unionist Party was more popular in Northern and Eastern Sudan. Whole tribes and/or ethnic groups tend to be loyal to certain political parties. For example, Arab groups in Darfur were historically loyal to the Umma Party, while the Fur supported the DUP. This means that election campaigns have often not been crucial in determining the results of elections.

Belonging to a certain ethnic group tends to determine the fate of a candidate, although it is not guaranteed—in rare cases candidates belonging to a different ethnic or tribal group can win in places not dominated by their own group. Local leaders—tribal and religious—are generally coopted by political parties to mobilize voters. Prior to the National Islamic Front's (NIF) rise to power in 1989, most tribal and religious leaders in rural Sudan were loyal to the Umma Party or DUP, but loyalties changed due to increases in political restrictions and the growth of intimidation, cooptation and bribery as tactics to win support of local leaders. Some politicians who were previously loyal to the sectarian parties changed loyalties to safeguard their interests and those of their constituencies.

Knowing that Sudan's regional or tribal affiliations tended to determine a kind of blind loyalty to the two major sectarian political parties, the NIF campaigned successfully for the continuation of the Graduate Constituencies during the 1986 elections. With its higher proportion of graduates, the NIF was able to target regions where there were few graduates—for the graduate seats there was no restriction on where voters could register, which enabled better educated ex-patriates to target their votes very effectively. This was a successful tactic and the NIF won 21 of the 28 graduate seats, as well as three non-graduate constituencies, achieving third place overall and making itself an important new national political contender.

Rural campaigns

While election results may be predictable, this does not mean that election campaigns do not need to be well-organized operations. In rural areas, candidates with many different political orientations try to convince people to vote for them. Candidates normally gather people together in open spaces like playgrounds, or sometimes mosques, and talk about their political programmes. Other ceremonial occasions like weddings, funerals and harvest parties may also be used as platforms for campaigning. During these events, promises are usually made to people, including building schools, health facilities and boreholes.

Providing some hospitality is an important part of election campaigns and symbolically important for candidates. Depending on the financial standing of a candidate, this may be in the form of big feasts that involve killing sheep or a bull. Since most candidates are local gentry and relatively well off, they offer food and drinks during their election campaigns. But those who attend such feasts and enjoy food and drinks do not necessarily vote for the candidate who throws the feast. The late Sadig El-Mahdi once commented to his followers about the campaign feast of a contender: 'Eat the bull and vote for your man.' In short, his supporters should enjoy the hospitality, but nonetheless vote for the Umma Party, thus enjoying the best of both worlds!

Candidates sometimes also provide transport for people so that they can make it to polling stations on election day to cast their votes. In the countryside, several scattered villages generally use one polling station, which means providing transport for supporters is crucial to in getting your vote out.

Urban campaigns

Campaign practices in the cities are different from those in the countryside. For a start, it is rare to see instances of conspicuous hospitality as described above. Campaigns in urban areas rely more on the media, but also may include house-to-house visits to convince individual households of voters. Candidates normally employ or request the support of young women and men in their campaigns as young people are seen as being able to use their networks and connections to effectively lobby for support. Fierce competition between candidates at times leads to

local conflicts, but this rarely becomes violent. At times, rival candidates collude to defeat another, which happened to the leader of the National Islamic Front, Hassan al-Turabi, in 1986.

Despite the systems and conventions that have developed around campaigns, they often do not run as smoothly as described. For example, during the 2010 and 2015 elections, the government, with the assistance of the police used force to obstruct the campaigns of contenders. Some candidates were arrested, while others were not allowed to organize their campaigns or political rallies. During the 2010 election, security forces in Khartoum denied one presidential candidate, Abdullah Ali Ibrahim, the right to inaugurate his election campaign despite the fact that he had obtained all the relevant permissions from police authorities.

Candidates who were seen as being a serious threat to the NCP, which was then in government, found the space for campaigning to be severely restricted. In comparison, the NCP's candidates received significant financial support. During its time in power, the NCP successfully altered traditional loyalties towards the Umma and DUP and coopted tribal and religious leaders. It was also able to use incipient organizational structures such as popular committees and women's organizations to buy loyalty, using the organizations to distribute patronage to the poor in the form of food, clothes and money. Women also became important electoral actors. In 2010 and 2015 NCP women supporters undertook house-to-house campaigning in Khartoum and other urban areas.

What regulations govern campaigns?

Electoral campaigns in Sudan are governed by the Election Act (2008). This stipulates that the campaign period for elections should last between 30 and 70 days and end one day prior to election day itself. During campaigns candidates should enjoy unrestricted freedom of expression and access to information. The election commission, in theory, guarantees the rights of all candidates to use public media on an equal basis and should prevent discrimination in the coverage of campaign activities. Campaign regulations also allow the use of published materials in different forms, and the use of electronic media provided that it does not obstruct or sabotage the campaign.

The act prohibits candidates and political parties from using funds originating in foreign countries or provided by other foreign organizations. The sources of funding allowed by the commission include, members of the political party itself; the candidates' own financial resources; government funding; and donations approved by the Election Commission. The use of state resources in campaigns is prohibited. Candidates and their parties must submit detailed and audited accounts of their electoral campaigns' incomes and expenditures.

While the regulations contained within the Election Act provide a strong basis for oversight of Sudan's political campaigns, overall the system remains weighted towards the government. There is no structured system of campaign finance in Sudan and no public funding for election campaigns. The only support that candidates get during campaigns is their access to state-owned media. In lieu of public funding, candidates have to use their own resources or fundraise from different sources, including the business community. Some merchants fund political parties with the understanding that they will receive favours if the candidate is elected. For example, during 2015 elections, it was rumoured that a number of pro-NCP businessmen provided big sums of money for the party's campaigns.

Access to media outlets is also unequal amongst different candidates. In 2010, one candidate who challenged President Bashir was not allowed to launch his election campaign. Generally, candidates campaign with little funding, the exception being those who are already wealthy, or who have illegal access to public funds.

How is the media accessed by candidates?

Until 1989, the use of media in election campaigns was limited. The only widely available media outlet was the radio and there were no private stations. Television was limited to cities and major towns, while newspapers did not reach rural areas (and often still do not) and when they do so are more likely to be used as food wrappers or containers, rather than as a source of news. As seen above, candidates use traditional means (voice amplifiers in urban areas and feasts or hospitality in the countryside) during campaigns.

Things changed somewhat with the spread of mass media and especially the internet, which allows people to access information from multiple sources and communicate their ideas in ways that governments cannot control so easily. In the context of Sudan, election campaigns and the media can be looked at in two ways:

First, under President Bashir's regime, the media was put under tight control and censorship. Newspapers were confiscated and banned without due judicial process and journalists were detained and stopped from writing. Second, during the 2010 and 2015 elections authorities violated provisions of the Election Act that stipulate equal access to state-owned media outlets for all candidates. Such access was either denied or, when availed, provided in ways that did not benefit opposition parties or independent candidates.

On 18 February 2015, just three days before the official start of the election campaign, the security services in Khartoum confiscated 18 newspapers. This was a regular occurrence even before the elections: the security services citing the National Intelligence and Security Services Act, which allows the confiscation of newspapers and detention of journalists for long periods. There have also been other forms of censorship whereby security forces order editors to remove critical articles from newspapers before publication. If the newspaper has already been sent to the press, this may lead to the cancellation of an entire print-run.

However, the internet, and social media specifically, has provided people with new digital spaces that government is less able to control. During the latter years of the Bashir regime, commentary on social media was generally critical of the government. While it was originally an urban phenomenon, internet access and social media use is now spreading further into the countryside, making it an increasingly important tool for information sharing and mobilization.

Social media was particularly important during the popular uprising that toppled President Bashir in 2019. The manner in which it was used to mobilize thousands of young Sudanese, particularly in Khartoum, demonstrates its likely effect on future electoral campaigns. Planning for post-transition elections should factor in the importance of social media, as well as more traditional forms.

The way forward

The holding of free, fair and transparent elections is one of the key objectives of the transitional government. To achieve this, it will be important to look at the practices of historical election campaigns in Sudan and learn from what went wrong, what went right, and what should be done to ensure that previous malpractices are avoided. To achieve this, some general points should be considered:

First, the provisions related to election campaigns that are included in the Election Act need to be revised or tightened so that when authorities violate those provisions people can take the matter to court. One serious flaw in previous elections is that authorities have tended to violate these provisions with impunity.

Second, any revisions to the Election Act should be carried out through wide consultations and in a participatory manner. Political parties must be a part of this.

Third, the process of forming the constitutional court must happen more quickly. It is only the constitutional court that can redress violations relating to malpractices in the conduct of elections.

Fourth, political parties need to be better trained and sensitized about election campaigns, campaign funds and how media outlets can be utilized during election campaigns.



Credits

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