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P. O. Box 34, Juba, South Sudan • Tel: +211 (0)956 305 780
Email: thesudd.institute@gmail.com • www.suddinstitute.org

WEEKLY REVIEW

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The Implications of Al Bashir's Downfall on South Sudan

Abraham A. Awolich

Recent political developments in the Sudan dominate street conversations and various social media outlets in Juba, South Sudan. The Sudanese revolutionary forces that brought an end to a 30-year rule of President Omar Al Bashir find a lot of sympathy and support among the ordinary South Sudanese citizens, who, at one point before their own independence, suffered Al Bashir's misrule. They have been on the receiving end of the brutal and genocidal policies of President Al Bashir, informed largely by his extremist Islamic inclinations. Like their Sudanese counterparts, South Sudanese have been celebrating the departure of Al Bashir, with hopes of a possibility of a renewed bond defined by improved social, political, cultural, and economic relations with South Sudan raised in the Sudan.

The excitements on the streets of Juba and elsewhere tell a story of a people relieved of Al Bashir's oppressive rule. Deep in their hearts and minds, however, there are lingering feelings of doubts, uncertainty and even worry about these new developments in the Sudan. There are feelings of uncertainty and doubts because of the subjugation the successive Khartoum regimes carried out against South Sudanese, where regimes changed but nothing changed positively in terms of the relations between the North and the South. Bashir is the 4th Sudanese leader ousted through popular uprising since Sudan's independence 1956 and none of these changes of leadership at the center in Khartoum brought any significant positive change in the relations between the North and the South. Even after the separation of South Sudan from Sudan in 2011 following many years of protracted wars, relations have not improved. South Sudan still has unimplemented agreements with Sudan, including the Cooperation Agreement of September 2012 and parts of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) pertaining to the region of Abyei.

The Cooperation Agreement addresses 8 matters, which form 8 agreements, that include (1) oil and related economic matters, (2) status of nationals in counterpart state, (3) border issues including demarcation, (4) central bank issues, (5) trade & related issues, (6) assets, liabilities, arrears & claims, (7) post services benefit (such as pensions), and (8) security arrangements. Most of 8 agreements in the Cooperation Agreement have hardly been implemented, with the exception of oil agreement to a certain degree. While most of the CPA was implemented, particularly protocol pertaining to the southern region, the Abyei Protocol and border demarcation clauses remain unimplemented. Abyei people were supposed to decide through a referendum whether they should join South Sudan or be part of Sudan.

Therefore, while Bashir's ouster excites people, they are also uncertain of what follows next given the fact that several regimes have been changed in the Sudan since 1956 but no concrete positive change has come to the periphery of the Sudan. So, people want to know whether things would change for the better or it would be business as usual. One inescapable question in the minds of many South Sudanese is what the change of guard in the Sudan represents in terms of its relationship with South Sudan. Another question pertains to the impact Al Bashir's departure has on the Peace Agreement he helped the South Sudanese belligerents signed in September last year.

This paper seeks to answer these questions in order to provide a concise view on the political dynamics in Sudan as seen from across the southern border. The hope is that this analysis could help us better understand the mixed feelings euphoria, worry and fear generated by the on-going developments in Sudan. It is apparent that citizens in both countries are concerned by the situation given that the events remain fluid and precarious, as the actors remain divided on the way forward. One particularly important matter of concern is the possibility of Al-Bashir's allies infiltrating the transitional government.

This review starts with highlights into key developments leading to the fall of President Bashir, followed by a look into subsequent events. The second section looks at potential challenges and opportunities in this crisis as regards the relationship between Sudan and South Sudan. The review concludes with a number of recommendations.

Key Developments Leading to the Downfall of President Bashir

President Bashir's 30-year reign of terror and genocide came to an abrupt end on the 11th April 2019 when the military announced his removal from power in Khartoum¹. The news of Al Bashir's fall came after months of protests, which started in the town of Atbara and spreading across cities in the Sudan, including the Capital Khartoum. Sudanese have been mounting protests since 2012 but the most recent waves of protests began on 19 December 2018 in response to an unusually growing price of bread in

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/11/world/africa/sudan-omar-hassan-al-bashir.html>

Atbara, then quickly spread to Port Sudan, Dongola, and Khartoum². Protestors set fire to the National Congress Party (NCP) headquarters in Atbara and Dongola. More generally, the demonstrations broke out in part as a result of skyrocketing costs of living and deteriorating economic conditions at all levels of society³. The protests quickly evolved from demands for urgent economic reforms to demands for Omar al-Bashir to step down. An American writer was reported as saying, “The immediate crisis and pressing need that has pushed people to risk their lives and go out in protest, is to demand their daily bread. Bread is what drove people into the streets, but 30 years of hardship and violent oppression is what is keeping there”⁴ (sic). One Sudanese speaking to the same source corroborated this, saying, “If the protests were only about economic issues then people would have stopped participating in them after the government declared they would bring the prices of bread back down after the initial increase.”⁵

On 7th January 2019, Kenya’s Daily Nation reported the arrest of over 800 protesters in the Sudan in December alone⁶. On the 9th of January a large protest broke out in Khartoum and Gadaref, with thousands of protesters chanting "revolution is the people's choice" and calling on longtime leader Omar al-Bashir to step down. The demonstration in Gadaref came just hours after Sudan's Interior Minister, Ahmed Bilal Othman, told the Parliament that police have arrested 816 people since protests erupted on Dec 19, initially over rising bread prices and shortages but which soon shifted to calls for al-Bashir to step down.⁷ A group called Sudanese Professional Association, which is made up of 15 trade unions, became the leading organizer of the protests⁸.

By February, the government had placed major restrictions on the media coverage of the protests, censoring major newspapers⁹. As events unfolded at a faster pace, President Bashir declared a year-long state of emergency on the 22nd of February 2019 and

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/large-protests-erupt-across-sudan-over-price-hikes>

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/protests-rising-prices-spread-sudan-khartoum-181220132130661.html>

⁴ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/its-more-bread-why-are-protests-sudan-happening>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/africa/Over-800-arrested-in-Sudan-demos/1066-4924844-eudqlf/index.html>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/podcasts/thetake/2019/02/government-sudan-omar-al-bashir-unraveling-190201152844176.html>

⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2019/02/sudan-crumbling-regime-puts-squeeze-media-190216064454797.html>

dissolved both the national and regional governments.¹⁰ The next day, Bashir announced a new government with Mohamed Tahir Ayala as Prime Minister, Awad Mohamed Ahmed Ibn Auf as first vice president and a defense minister, and Ahmed Haroun, who, like Bashir, is also wanted by the ICC for war crimes, replaced Al-Bashir as leader of the National Congress Party¹¹. As the protesters grew bolder, the security forces became more vicious in their attempt to suppress protests, especially at the university campuses, targeting students both in Khartoum and Omdurman¹². As a measure to strengthen security forces in dealing with the protests, President Bashir issued a degree banning all unauthorized demonstrations, prohibiting the illegal trade of fuel and wheat, and threatened a 10-year prison sentence for those found not cooperating; he also banned the "unauthorized circulation of information, photos or documents that belong to the president's family" and introduced capital controls on the trade of gold and foreign currency.¹³

By March, the role of women in the protests became critical and so special demonstrations were organized to honor the role of women, with protesters chanting slogans such as, "You women, be strong" and "This revolution is a women's revolution"¹⁴. This follows arrest of a number of women, who were sentenced and handed punishment by flogging. One such woman is Muzan Abdul Samiaa, who was sentenced but later released. The protesters honored her by naming a neighborhood square after her¹⁵.

By April 6, 2019, following the resignation of Algerian President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the Association of Sudanese Professionals called for massive demonstrations and a march to the armed forces headquarters, a call to which thousands gladly responded¹⁶.

¹⁰ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-22/sudan-s-al-bashir-declares-state-of-emergency-for-one-year?srnd=all>

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-protests/day-into-emergency-rule-sudans-bashir-names-vp-and-prime-minister-idUSKCN1QC011>

¹² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-27/protesters-face-whippings-and-tear-gas-in-sudanese-crackdown>

¹³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-26/sudan-s-al-bashir-issues-decrees-to-curb-protests-black-market>

¹⁴ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/sudan-women-lead-uprising-vs-omar-hassan-al-bashir-and-suffer-for-it/>

¹⁵ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudanese-woman-sentenced-be-lashed-has-square-named-her-honour>

¹⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/sudan-civil-war-omar-al-bashir-khartoum-bouteflika-a8863881.html>

For the first time the military appeared to have been divided, as some soldiers threatened to shoot civilians, while others took side with the protesters. The protesters decided to sit-in at the military headquarters and a week later they were still there, demanding resignation of the president¹⁷. In response to the mounting pressure, the government decided on 7th of April 2019 to shut down the social media and a complete power blackout¹⁸. The protestors under the guidance of the Association of Sudanese Professionals issued a press statement on the 8th of April 2019 calling for the establishment of a transitional council to finalize the transition in Sudan¹⁹. On the same day, a video of a young woman named Alaa Salah, was circulating online, becoming a symbol of the revolution in the country, once again showing the role of women in the Sudanese revolution²⁰. On the 11th of April 2019, President Bashir was overthrown, and the military took over²¹.

The Implications of Bashir's Fall

For many ordinary South Sudanese, the defining feature of the transition in the Sudan is the question of what will happen to the relationship between the two countries. Since the separation in 2011, the relationship between Sudan and South Sudan has been defined by acrimony, distrust and confrontation. Nearly all rebellions against South Sudan have always found a home in Sudan. Sudan, on the other hand, believes that South Sudan continues to support the SPLM/A North and Darfur rebels. There have also been various attempts by Sudan to disrupt economic viability of South Sudan by shutting its borders and confiscating South Sudan oil. The two countries have also been unable to reach a compromise on the Abyei Protocol, with marked episodes of violence in the region. Although there is Cooperation Agreement between the two countries, largely on the four freedoms for citizens, trade and economic cooperation, and security cooperation, much as to the implementation of these protocols has depended on the mood swings of Al Bashir's government. The border between the two countries remained shut, meaning there is no meaningful trade going on between the two countries.

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47869171>

¹⁸ <https://qz.com/africa/1589356/sudan-protests-cuts-off-electricity-social-media-shutdown/>

¹⁹ <https://www.sudaneseprofessionals.org/en/dfc-press-release-april-8-2019/>

²⁰ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tamerragriffin/sudan-protests-woman-car-iconic-photo-alaa-salah>

²¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/11/world/africa/sudan-omar-hassan-al-bashir.html>

All these issues and concerns are at stake in light of the on-going transition in the Sudan. While it is too early to predict what would happen, South Sudanese have a reason to be optimistic about the possibility of an improving relationship with the Sudan. There are a number of reasons for this optimism. First, the leaders of the revolution and the ordinary Sudanese citizens want a good relationship between the two states. Many Sudanese blame Al Bashir's mismanagement for the secession of South Sudan and the continuing acrimonious relationship, even after South Sudan's independence. Second, much of what led to the crises in the Sudan is a result of economic mismanagement and heavy investment in fighting wars that are largely intended to keep the previous regime in power. It is highly plausible that a new government in Sudan would place priority on improving the economy and this includes improving relations and trade with South Sudan. Third, the hope is that the transition in Sudan is not just a change of regime, but also a return of a comprehensive peace. That is, all armed oppositions in Darfur, Blue Nile, and Southern Kordofan must be involved in the transition and that all these wars be ended once and for all. If this happens, the relationship between Sudan and South Sudan is likely to improve. Lastly, it is clear the revolutionaries on the streets of Khartoum have rejected the Islamists/extremists in the next government. The Islamists have always tried to forcefully Islamize the people of South Sudan and adjacent regions, forming one of the driving factors of the South Sudanese independence.

While there is a reason to be optimistic, there are also real fears. First, the situation in the Sudan remains fluid and fragile; it could suddenly turn violent. This is because there are many moving parts that may not fit all together. There is the military on the one hand, which, to a larger degree, is associated with the previous regime, and there are protestors, who, on the other hand, oppose the military and associates of a recently ousted regime. If Sudan makes a mistake of disbanding the military, as we have seen in Libya and Iraq, the country could probably fall into an elevated 'fragility trap.' Second, there is a subtle tension between various tribes and ethnic groups. The many of the protesters seem to want nothing to do with the dominant Arab groups during this transition. Third, it is evidence that the top cream of the NIF leadership is gone, but the whole system, built over 30 years, remains at large and if pushed against the wall, could retaliate violently. Fourth, if the existing armed oppositions from Darfur, Southern Kordofan, and Blue Nile are not brought on board, a failure of the transition to bring about meaningful reforms and change, these groups might accelerate their military activities against the new government. If this happens, the country would face a much serious civil strife. Fifth, if the new regime continues to support instability in South Sudan and bankrolls militia groups against South Sudan, this may attract retaliatory measures from South Sudan, worsening the situation in both countries. Lastly, if the economic condition continues to bite and other dark forces in the Islamic world begin to exploit the situation in the country, citizens may feel a sense of disillusionment, uncertainty, and distrust in the new leadership, prolonging the crises.

What is South Sudan to Do?

First and foremost, South Sudan has moral obligation to side with the Sudanese revolutionaries on the streets of Khartoum because their cause is an extension of the

SPLM revolutionary struggle for a more inclusive, secular, and democratic country. Not only are they championing SPLM's own ideals, they have also won, and this must be recognized in whichever form this is done diplomatically without offsetting internal dynamics or interfering in internal matters of the Sudanese.

Second, if there are two countries that understand Sudan better, it is South Sudan and Egypt, and so South Sudan should play a leading role in helping Sudan achieve a peaceful transition. That is, South Sudan should play a mediating role and help the military council and the revolutionary leaders to negotiate a peaceful transfer of power that ensures that Sudan does not disintegrate or descent into another civil war. This could be done by widening the dialogue table to bring on board armed oppositions and using the transition as a mechanism for achieving a comprehensive peace in the Sudan.

Third, South Sudan should avoid any military overtures or maneuvering; this could be interpreted in the Sudan as an attempt to take advantage of the evolving situation. In fact, the military could use this as an opportunity to rally support for continuing military rule and a better tool to empty the streets. Fourth, South Sudan should discontinue any financial and or other forms of relationships with the old regime officials, as this may be interpreted wrongly in the Sudan, in addition to the fact that it is immoral.

Lastly, South Sudan should keep its own grievances with Sudan out for now until there is clarity in terms of a new government in the Sudan. Again, this is to avoid a neighbor thinking that South Sudan is taking advantage of the situation. However, once there is a government in place, South Sudan should lay all its interests on the table, including demands into border demarcation such as mile 14, resolution of Abyei through the conduct of the referendum for the Ngok Dinka only, the resolution of the Panthou dispute, an end to support of any armed oppositions from both sides, a renewed trade and economic relation, and the development of the Tamazuj region.

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The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.

About the author

Abraham A. Awolich is the Acting Executive Director at the Sudd Institute. Awolich's research has focused on governance and public administration. Awolich serves currently on the Board of South Sudan Revenue Authority. He also serves double roles as Deputy Coordinator and the Head of the Finance and Administration Unit for the National Dialogue Secretariat. Before joining the Sudd Institute, Awolich was the co-founder & Executive Director of the Sudan Development Foundation (SUDEF). Awolich has a Master's Degree in Public Administration from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and

Public Affairs at Syracuse University and Bachelor's Degree from the University of Vermont in Anthropology and Business Administration. Awolich is a McNair Scholar and winner of the prestigious Samuel Huntington Public Service Award in 2006