

Sudan's ageing regime has few answers to the latest wave of protests
By Nesrine Malik, The Guardian
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Sudan's student protests are no mass uprising. But Omar al-Bashir's bankrupt government is likely to collapse from within

For almost a week Khartoum has been witnessing protests sparked by female students objecting to a rise in the cost of accommodation at the University of Khartoum. When their protest was met with disproportionate force on the part of the police, others joined their ranks, and there have been daily protests since.

While the demonstrations have coalesced mostly around student bodies and university campuses, the incidents come at a precarious time for the Sudanese regime. In recent days the government has floated the Sudanese pound, lifted state subsidies on fuel, and increased taxes and custom duty on luxury products.

This is in order to plug a \$2.4bn budget deficit precipitated by the loss of oil revenue since the secession of South Sudan last year – a loss that the government of Sudan, in its short-sightedness, had not made provisions for.

Since the protests started, the response of the security forces – Sudan's infamous National Intelligence and Security Services – has been unrestrained. It has been characterised by detentions, interrogations, intimidation, and then release. Journalists have also been targeted and detained for doing little else but observing demonstrations. Bloomberg's Salma El-Wardany was arrested on Thursday; her work permit was rescinded, and she is now under threat of deportation.

However, the authorities' response has been confused, with a lack of co-ordination between different sections of the state's law enforcement apparatus. There have been rumours of clashes between the security forces and the police, who allegedly objected to the former's heavy hand.

While there have been protests before, most notably during the earlier stages of the Arab spring, something about the current wave feels different. This is not to suggest that it will necessarily translate into a popular revolt that will overthrow the government – the "stability as a virtue" sentiment still holds strong among the Sudanese populace – but it is putting pressure on a state that is bankrupt and struggling to fulfil its most basic functions.

The government appears to have run out of ideas, and the willpower to come up with new ones. Part of this is simply age – the National Congress party (NCP) has been in power for 23 years, and has failed to inject fresh blood or rejuvenate its core values at the higher echelons of power. There is no succession plan, or meaningful alliance with other political forces in the country.

When power is concentrated in the hands of so few (essentially, President Bashir and his immediate inner circle), government falls victim to their whims, appetite or – in this instance – old age, fatigue and incompetence. Despite the crackdown on demonstrators, the government's public tone has been more conciliatory and less confrontational than the norm, the vice-president even daring to utter sentiments about voluntarily stepping down before being forcibly removed.

Although there is still no mass mobilisation, this is not out of active support for the government. Widespread resignation is beginning to change into scepticism, an increasing awareness that the government might not be in full possession of its authoritarian faculties.

But there is a deeper sense of aimlessness that has pervaded the national mood since the secession of the South. This has its roots in the failure of the government to allay uncertainty since the separation, or create a national vision or narrative that gives people a clear sense of where the country is heading.

Today there was a call to mass protests after Friday prayers. One of the problems with galvanising people against the NCP, however, is the absence of alternatives, the absence of a moral counterweight, either in the shape of opposition politicians or a visible movement of grassroots campaigners. But an economic crisis, armed conflict along the borders, a stalemate with South Sudan on sharing the oil yield and a malfunctioning political system might all render a popular uprising unnecessary, and cripple the government from within.

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