

Sudan at the Tipping Point: Protests in Khartoum May Portend Regime Change

Eric Reeves

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Sudan is in the chaotic throes of what may well be the final act of the National Islamic Front/National Congress Party regime, which next week will have been in power for 23 years. An "Arab Spring" environment, which seemed improbable a year ago, has been created by a confluence of developments—and even the formidable security and military forces of the regime may soon be put to a final test by deeply unhappy Sudanese civilians. At the same time, there is evidence of considerable bitterness within the officer corps over renewed military confrontation with now independent South Sudan; there is also intense dismay within the ranks over the mauling the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) have endured in fighting against the forces of the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North in the Nuba Mountains. The army may no longer be the bulwark that it has been for the regime in the past.

But ultimately, as has been the case in the past in Sudan, it is an imploding economy that has galvanized an increasingly broad spectrum of resistance. The now daily protests and demonstrations in and around Khartoum are the most conspicuous evidence. There is also a fierce crackdown on news reporting and a growing confiscation of newspapers. And for good reason: in the regime's mind there is much grim news to suppress—about the economy and about public disaffection with the aging kleptocrats who have created this mess. Despite this predictably brutal repression, economic realities in Sudan are bearing down on a country with the same demographics as other "Arab Spring" countries, including very large populations under 30, with no employment or even prospects for finding meaningful jobs.

Trouble began when South Sudan achieved independence on July 9, 2011, despite a range of military and other provocations by Khartoum. Taking 75 percent of the region's oil reserves with it, the South refused to capitulate before Khartoum's extortionate demand for a \$36/barrel transit fee for Southern crude moving north to Port Sudan; with talks at an impasse, Juba shut down all Southern oil production in January 2012. Khartoum's brinkmanship had failed, and this proved the final catalyst for accelerating economic collapse.

Inflation is now over 30 percent (some economists believe the figure may be over 40 percent), and a paralyzing hyper-inflation may be impending. The IMF expects the northern Sudanese economy to *contract* by a staggering 7 percent this year; there are almost no foreign exchange reserves, making international trade and imports increasingly difficult and in many cases impossible. The Sudanese pound continues its precipitous decline, despite the regime's repeated claims to have recently received a large infusion of hard currency from another country (no particulars were provided). The current black market currency exchange rates suggest no one believes the cash infusion actually occurred. And looming over all of this is the gargantuan external debt burden Khartoum has incurred over many years, now approaching \$40 billion—a figure so large that the current economy cannot possibly generate sufficient income to service, let alone repay, such debt.

Unsurprisingly after the loss of virtually all oil revenues, the regime confronts huge budget gaps. These have led to cuts in subsidies for two of the most valued consumer items: fuel and sugar (from which many northern Sudanese receive a significant portion of their daily calorie intake). The cutting of the fuel subsidy could be especially damaging politically:

"The Union of Sudanese Businessmen has urged the authorities to seek out alternative austerity measures as opposed to their 'catastrophic' intention of lifting fuel subsidies, warning that the move **will put the government at risk.**" (*Sudan Tribune*, June 4, 2012) (emphasis added)

The regime's claimed cuts in its party bureaucracy and government staff don't begin to address the present budget problems—or other economic issues that have been festering for years: gross mismanagement of the agricultural sector; profligate military purchases; non-transparent accounting; and extraordinary levels of self-enrichment. The consequences are increasingly conspicuous: even long-time economically China withdrew funding for a massive agricultural project in March when it became clear that Khartoum could not provide the crude oil collateral that Beijing required.

Moreover, waging war is expensive and Khartoum's SAF is actively engaged in Darfur, Blue Nile, South Kordofan, and along the North/South border. Even the marked increase in use of militia forces is not sufficient to diminish these costs significantly. This aggressive military posture appears unlikely to change, since some of the most powerful and irrationally hawkish members of the regime seem determined to prevail militarily rather than engage in negotiations. Not only does this obduracy deeply endanger as many as 2 million civilians in South Kordofan, Blue Nile, as well as refugees in South Sudan, but makes international economic rescue politically impossible, as it should.

Protests were inevitable, and this past week they have been growing in size and intensity. Two prominent foreign journalists have been arrested, an increasing number of newspapers have been confiscated, and journalists face a ferocious crackdown; the regime clearly fears that the message of the protesters will gain prominence going forward. And that message is clear, as Middle East Online reported yesterday:

"Groups of students gathered in streets around the University of Khartoum, located next to the Blue Nile river in the city centre, shouting slogans such as 'Khartoum, rise up! rise up!' and 'The people want to change the regime!'" (June 20, 2012)

Regime change won't come easily. The National Islamic Front/National Congress Party has been ruthlessly effective in creating security services tasked only with keeping these cynical men in power; the likelihood is very high that as protestors gain momentum, they will be met with brutality comparable to that in Syria. Men who came to power by military coup and are guilty of genocide will not hesitate in using whatever means are necessary to suppress democratic aspirations. But many Sudanese—after 23 years—have a sense that there is nothing more to lose. The moribund and self-serving sectarian parties—Umma and the DUP—are no longer the source of political opposition, and are widely perceived as irrelevant to democratic reform in Sudan. And for the marginalized people of eastern Sudan, Darfur, Nubia, Blue Nile, the Nuba Mountains, regime change can't come quickly enough.

It will be bloody, very bloody—but the demise of the National Islamic Front/National Congress Party may be near. Those in Sudan aspiring to freedom and national democratic transformation deserve international recognition as well as strong and steady support.

[Eric Reeves, a professor at Smith College, has published extensively on Sudan, nationally and internationally, for more than a decade. He is author of *A Long Day's Dying: Critical Moments in the Darfur Genocide*.]

