

Why the Khartoum Regime Will Fall

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The success of the current, rapidly growing rebellion in Khartoum and elsewhere in Sudan is far from assured. The National Islamic Front/National Congress Party regime—facing a serious domestic challenge for the first time in years—will use all the considerable force at its disposal to retain full control over national wealth and power. Brutality has already increased with the number and determination of protestors, who now include not only students but lawyers and other civilian constituencies. And as the protests spread—to Omdurman and other parts of central Khartoum, to Sennar, el-Obeid, Wad Medani, Damazin (Blue Nile University), Gedaref, Kosti, and Port Sudan—there is even more pressure on this ruthlessly survivalist regime to emulate the tactics of Gaddafi in Libya and al-Assad in Syria. The coming days and weeks are likely to be extremely bloody.

But Sudanese with whom I've spoken in recent days are unanimous in their conclusion that now is the moment—that having come this far, there is no turning back. If the moment is lost, another may not come again soon. There is also a growing sense of the regime's vulnerability—a belief that after 23 years of NIF/NCP tyranny, the regime's leadership cannot react to the current economic crisis except with the most savage methods of repression. This in turn will only alienate more of the civilian population. What is certain is that insofar as this is a rebellion sparked most immediately by rapidly rising consumer prices, the regime is out of options. The broader economy continues an implosion that began over a year ago and is now accelerating; this is nowhere more conspicuous than in the rapid increase in the inflation rate.

At the same time, long pent-up political grievances on the part of the various marginalized peoples of Sudan have created a super-charged environment for the uprising. Bitter discontent and anger runs deep in the eastern states (Red Sea, Kassala, Gedaref). In Darfur the expedient Doha "peace agreement" has failed miserably, and millions of Darfuris continue to suffer in camps and insecure rural areas. In the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan and in Blue Nile engineered famine has begun to bite deeply, and the refugees pouring into South Sudan convey innumerable tales of horror and desperation. Nubia in the far north has also long been restive, and North Kordofan is no bastion of support for the NIF/NCP. Decades of economic neglect and abandonment—the failure to provide development aid, schools, hospitals, roads, and other basic elements of infrastructure—are now energizing the economically driven rebellion.

As the uprising in Sudan continues to spread and intensify during its second week, there are several key indicators of how well it is succeeding, and how likely it is to achieve its central goal of regime change.

[1] Some stop-gap appeasement measures may be adopted by the regime; prices for consumer goods may be manipulated over the short term in order to take steam out of the uprising. But these efforts can't be too great or the regime will be seen as capitulating and demands will only grow. And in refusing to consider reinstating the fuel subsidy, the regime today dug its heels in deeply. For as even the NIF/NCP recognizes, the extraordinary economic pressures that brought about the highly unpopular decision to remove subsidies can no longer be resisted; they derive from budgetary realities that cannot be changed. The fuel subsidy alone has cost approximately \$2 billion annually. Budgetary woes would only be exacerbated by short-term measures. The upshot is that inflation is rising steeply and inexorably in Sudan, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

The \$2.4 billion budget gap created by the loss of oil revenues from South Sudan simply cannot be closed, even with an end to the fuel subsidy. In fact, the economy is projected by the IMF to *contract* by over 7 percent this year, further diminishing the revenue base for the regime. Without the ability to borrow money to cover this growing shortfall, the regime will have no choice but to print more money. This is the fastest and surest route to higher, and accelerating, inflation. The continuing and substantial fall in the exchange value of the Sudanese pound is only the most conspicuous measure of international assessment of the currency at present. When the printing presses are cranked up, the pound will go into free fall.

If those economists who suggest inflation is already running at over 40 percent are correct, then adding to the budget deficit—as any significant re-instatement of subsidies would do—only increases the rate of inflation. Moreover, although the regime has vaguely promised to cushion the blow of inflation for food purchases, there are simply no means available to halt the effects of inflation, even for food. A typical food basket that today costs what is deemed an exorbitant 30 Sudanese pounds could very soon cost 60 pounds; and any stabilizing (i.e., subsidizing) of *this* price at previous price levels (in non-inflated pounds) will then be twice as expensive and will create an even greater budget gap—and more inflation. This is the engine of what economists call "hyper-inflation," and it will destroy not only the value of the Sudanese pound but the broader economy.

If hyper-inflation occurs, savings will be wiped out in a matter of weeks; banks will experience runs and soon fail; there will be no viable currency for international trade, even as there is exceedingly little in the way of foreign exchange reserves. Even domestic commercial transactions will be impossible and there will be a rapid move toward a barter economy. The desperate flight to what hard currency remains available on the black market will further exacerbate inflation.

The political ramifications of the economic implosion are many. It has already proved impossible for the regime to sustain the vast and expensive patronage network that over the years has provided critical political support; that network is now shrinking even further, eroding political support when it is most needed. Regime promises about streamlining government and the bureaucracies—even if carried out—are not remotely sufficient, but will certainly alienate many NIF/NCP loyalists. At the same time, the army and security services take up approximately half the budget (perhaps more); they are now being paid with an inflated currency that is increasingly worthless; large-scale desertions and defections will soon occur, particularly among soldiers recruited or conscripted from the marginalized regions (this is already occurring in the Nuba Mountains).

[2] A huge question looming over the current crisis is what position the army will take as protests grow. The National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) are likely to remain loyal to the end, but the army is potentially another story, especially given the evident rift between the most senior generals now exercising greatest political power in the regime, and the mid-level officer corps. The NIF/NCP ruthlessly purged the army on coming to power in 1989, and effectively destroyed it as an institution in the Egyptian mold. The army has never regained a true *esprit de corps*, and disaffected officers up to the rank of colonel may soon refuse to obey orders to use violence against protesting civilians.

So far the protestors have used no weapons beyond burning tires, blocking streets, and hurling rocks. But there are many weapons hidden away in and around Khartoum and the other cities in which protests have occurred; and if civilian casualties begin to mount, these weapons may well make an appearance, rapidly escalating the military and political stakes. Any such armed insurrection will be, in the regime's view, justification for rapid and extremely violent counter-measures. At this point a reprise of rebellion in Libya and Syria will be fully in evidence, although Sudan is vastly larger geographically than either (especially if Libya is understood to mean the coastal regions where more than 95 percent of the people live). Rebellion in areas as remote as Nubia, Port Sudan, el-Obeid, and Gedaref will be difficult to confront simultaneously, especially since the Sudan Armed Forces are taking a ferocious beating in the Nuba Mountains, and are spread thin in Darfur, Blue Nile, and the border regions with South Sudan, including areas immediately adjacent to Abyei.

Once desertions and defections begin, there will be a cascade. Morale is low among most of the front-line troops, and there is little desire to support a failing regime. If the NIF/NCP loses the unified support of the army, or even the mid-level officer corps, its days are numbered.

[3] The "Kauda coalition" that created the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) now takes on particular significance. It fashions a significant military alliance between the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement-North and Darfuri rebel groups, including the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), as well as the Beja Congress in the east. The military implications of the new alliance are potent. But even more significant is the political framework agreement negotiated by SRF elements: this provides a model

for how other political constituencies can begin negotiations over transitional and power-sharing arrangements even before the regime falls.

The inclusion of JEM in the SRF is particularly significant, given its Islamist background and troubling ties to the Popular Congress Party of Hassan al-Turabi. Djbril Ibrahim, the new leader of JEM, may well be more pragmatic than his brother Khalil, who was killed in a suspiciously sophisticated air strike late last year; moreover, Djbril doesn't carry the same grim baggage Khalil did from the North/South civil war, in which Khalil was complicit in many of the atrocity crimes committed against Southerners. If the kind of political negotiations that created the SRF can be replicated among other northern political constituencies, then a post-NIF/NCP government need not be as chaotic as some are predicting.

Indeed, the predictions of a "new Somalia" in Sudan if the regime falls have been consistently glib and tendentious, taking little account of the singular rapidity with which clan warfare developed, and enveloped, Somalia and Mogadishu in particular. The political culture in Sudan is richer and deeper, even if the opposition has been too compliant and ultimately feckless since the military coup that brought the NIF/NCP to power in June 1989. Here it is worth remembering that Sadiq el-Mahdi's (then) ruling Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party of Mohamed Osman Mirghani had come to terms on a peace agreement with the rebel movement in South Sudan (the SPLM/A) by June 1989. Indeed, it was precisely to abort this prospective peace agreement that the NIF launched its coup earlier than planned.

The political transition will be enormously difficult in the wake of the power vacuum produced by deposing the NIF/NCP. It will be a moment of profound historical truth for Sudan—but also for the international community.

[4] The international response is perhaps the greatest uncertainty at present. If important international actors continue to respond to the crisis on the basis of the perceptions that have guided U.S. Sudan policy during the Obama administration, the regime may well believe that it can triumph if it simply remains brutal enough. Khartoum finds the example of Syria is powerfully encouraging. Dismayingly, the U.S. continues to cleave to the judgment of special envoy Princeton Lyman as expressed in an interview of with Asharq Al-Awsat:

[Asharq Al-Awsat] The U.S. administration has welcomed the Arab Spring which has overthrown a number of dictatorships in the Middle East and led to free and fair elections being held. Are you calling for the Arab Spring to encompass Sudan, as well?

[Lyman] This is not part of our agenda in Sudan. Frankly, we do not want to see the ouster of the [Sudanese] regime, nor regime change. We want to see the regime carrying out reform via constitutional democratic measures.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] The SPLM has said that it wants to bring the Arab Spring to Sudan. Do you oppose this?

[Lyman] We want to see freedom and democracy [in Sudan], but not necessarily via the Arab Spring. (March 2011)

It would appear not to matter to Lyman that the overwhelming majority of Sudanese have long wanted regime change, and are now explicit in expressing this goal. Their seriousness can be measured by the increasing willingness to risk their lives and well-being to achieve such change. But the expedient and disingenuous declaration that the U.S. wants "to see the regime carry out reform via constitutional democratic measures" is a measure of how morally bankrupt the Obama administration's Sudan policy has become. There is not a shred of historical evidence that the NIF/NCP has the slightest interest in "reform via constitutional measures"—and Lyman and the Obama administration know this full well. No doubt Lyman felt that questions about an "Arab Spring" in Sudan were entirely hypothetical and that he could dodge the question with another expedient and disingenuous answer. But the "Arab Spring" has begun in Sudan; agnosticism, neutrality, and expediency are simply no longer policy options.

This is just as true for other important international actors, including the UN, the EU, as well as the African Union and the Arab League, though the latter two seem hopelessly compromised. What is certain is that "neutrality" in present circumstances offers tacit support to the regime; such "neutrality" and would seem to suggest that the U.S. is not alone in believing Khartoum capable of "carrying out reform via constitutional democratic measures." But present realities cannot be ignored; the regime is showing its true colors now that is threatened by democratic forces. As Amnesty International declared (June 22, 2012):

"The Sudanese government is showing zero tolerance for demonstrations and continues to deny the Sudanese people its right to peaceful assembly,' said Paule Rigaud, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Africa."

Moreover, for more than a year newspapers have experienced ever greater censorship, closures, fines, and confiscation at the hands of the regime. Any newspaper daring to report independently on the uprising risks the severest reprisals. Indeed, there are a number of reports that the regime has already shut down Internet and cell phone service, or will soon do so.

If the international community is honest and committed to furthering democracy and reform in Sudan, it is time for a fundamental recalibration of political equities. Moreover, this cannot be done on the basis of a purely "regional" assessment of how "acceptable" the current regime is. Libya has yet to emerge from the throes of its convulsive deposing of Gaddafi. Chad is ruled by the supremely callous and expedient Idriss Déby, whose attitude toward the regime in Khartoum is defined wholly by his own vicious survivalism. Central African Republic is a failed state. Khartoum is at war—economically and militarily—with its southern neighbor, South Sudan. Ethiopia and Eritrea both see Khartoum exclusively through the lens of a narrowly conceived national self-interest (although Ethiopian president Meles Zenawi has told the U.S. that he thinks that regime change is the only solution to the ongoing crises in Sudan). And Egypt is a state in transition, and it's simply not clear how Egypt's past neo-colonial attitude toward Sudan during the Mubarak years will change with a new president facing severe constraints imposed by the army.

The world cannot stand at a safe diplomatic distance, hiding behind absurd claims about the democratic capabilities of the NIF/NCP regime, or tendentious characterizations of "regional views"—or doubts about the "legitimacy" of the aspirations of those now rebelling against decades of tyranny. Support for those working for democracy and freedom in Sudan must be urgent, unambiguous, and tough-minded. Condemnation of *and response to* the regime's brutality must be vigorous and consistent. And this condemnation and response must forcefully address *all* the atrocity crimes that the regime continues to perpetrate—in the Nuba Mountains, in Blue Nile, in Darfur, and in the form of relentless aerial attacks on civilians in north and South Sudan. There can be little doubt that this is indeed the moment of truth for both Sudan and for the international community.

Libya and Syria offer telling examples of what happens when the world underestimates the ruthlessness of tyrants who will use any degree of force and violence to sustain themselves in power. The "Arab Spring" in Sudan offers a moment in which we may assess whether the world has learned anything about the costs of accommodating such tyranny.

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