

Change is in the air in Sudan

A new generation of activists use Facebook and Twitter, but arrests show promoting the message on the ground is harder

By: Nesrine Malik



President Omar al-Bashir addresses Sudanese students in Khartoum on 24 June. Nine days of protests against high prices were no Arab Spring, he said. Photograph: Ebrahim Hamid/AFP/Getty Images

The latest wave of protests in Sudan are the most durable revolt against the regime since its ascent to power via a military coup in 1989. Although austerity measures announced by the government have been the catalyst for the demonstrations, the main motivating factor is frustration with a government that after 23 years still seems incapable of providing political and economic security to the people.

Omar al-Bashir recently declared that there was to be no Arab spring in the country, but the regime is clearly unnerved. The last few days have seen a crackdown on activists and journalists and reports of regular beatings and detentions of protesters.

We do not need to see millions on the streets of Khartoum before it can be acknowledged that a fundamental shift has already taken place. Change is in the air. What Sudanese politics has lacked over the past two decades has been an active non-partisan opposition that is not in the thrall of the old political elite. For too long the head of state has been either a military man or an ineffectual sectarian leader with more tribal support than political nous. We now see a new generation of activists who are organising themselves through Facebook and Twitter and not pledging allegiance to any ideology or leader.

One of the problems with this nascent movement, however, has been that a significant number of its members are abroad. It is much harder to promote the message on the ground, as several arrested activists can attest.

Historically, the international community and the media have focused primarily on Darfur, the conflict with the South, and recently the Nuba mountains, casting all politics in the country in racial and religious polarities. What seems to have been ignored is the everyday plight of millions of Sudanese living in poverty and lack of security in towns where there is no war or bombardment, just the grinding, extractive, power-fixated governance of the National Congress Party (NCP).

The end of the civil war and the secession of the south have been crucial in forcing a reflective moment in Sudan. It is clear that there is now a pressing need for a recalibration.

The NCP has brought Sudan to a crossroads of its own creation. It is bankrupt financially and besieged by rebel movements in different parts of the country, a legacy of the marginalisation of the peripheries. Forces of nature, like the age of those in power, and the youth of a new generation, are kicking in. The status quo is untenable.

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