

Bashing Bashir
The Economist
05-10-2013

Bashing Bashir

Sudan's president faces his worst protests so far

A CRACKDOWN by Sudan's security forces on people protesting against the lifting of fuel subsidies has left dozens of people dead in the capital, Khartoum, and elsewhere in the country since September 23rd. President Omar al-Bashir's government was prepared for demonstrations, as its recent austerity measures virtually doubled the price of petrol and cooking gas overnight. But it did not foresee that, in carrying out what human-rights groups have described as a "shoot to kill" policy, the security forces would cause a bigger headache than had the protests themselves.

The regime says 34 people have died—the highest toll in any street protest since Mr Bashir took over 24 years ago. The Paris-based International Federation of Human Rights says at least 170 have been killed. Sudan's own Doctors' Syndicate puts the figure at 210.

The numbers might have mattered less had the bullets hit only the poor, who accounted for most of the victims. But when Saleh Sanhoury, a young chemist, was shot during a protest in Buri, a rich district of central Khartoum, the shock waves reverberated through the heart of the regime.

Mr Sanhoury was one of several young protesters from the capital's more affluent families to die. His handsome face has become a Facebook favourite for student would-be revolutionaries among Khartoum's disenfranchised intelligentsia. More to the point, his family is well-known in government circles, too.

On the night of Mr Sanhoury's funeral the president received a petition from 31 members of his own National Congress Party and leading Islamists, one of whom is a prominent general. They told him his "legitimacy" had never been so much in doubt. They want those responsible for the shootings to be prosecuted and the victims' families compensated. In the past Mr Bashir has ignored the intelligentsia as toothless. But the letter was more troubling. The president straddles a coalition that includes the ruling party, Islamists, the military and security forces, and tribal leaders. The letter's signatories included people from many of those camps.

Among other things, they also called for fuel subsidies to be brought back. That would be hard for Mr Bashir. The secession of South Sudan in 2011 led to the loss of much of the Sudanese state's oil income. It cannot afford to go on subsidising the lifestyle of Khartoum's better-off. So protests against the measures are likely to continue. The urban poor have already suffered months of price rises: inflation is officially just over 20% a year, but local businessmen say the true figure is closer to 50%. "They don't care who rules them," says a prominent local commentator. "But they care if they cannot afford to eat."

Luckily for Mr Bashir, such voices of dissent, though growing, express no common vision. The Twitter-savvy students chanting “Freedom” on the streets are hardly in tune with Islamists opposing Mr Bashir from within the regime. The traditional opposition parties, all led by ageing men, tend to be weak, inarticulate and ill-organised. Mr Bashir’s strength is that, so far, no obvious alternative to him has emerged.