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The Sudan Uprising and its possibilities: regional revolution, generational revolution, and an end to Islamist politics?

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Sudan Uprising: the graffiti reads 'Just Fall'- the slogan of the revolution.

Source: [Hind Mekki, Flickr](#).

Drawing on my book [Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan](#) I will be discussing the parallels between today's popular uprising (2019) and Sudan's two previous popular uprisings, the October Revolution of 1964 and the April Intifada of 1985. The leaders of those two uprisings were ultimately unable to establish a democratic political order in the long term, as the parliamentary systems they created were ultimately overthrown by military coups in 1969 and 1989 respectively. These military coups were launched in the name of ideologies that perceived parliamentary democracy as either too Western, too chaotic or too elitist. They ultimately lost their ideological character and brought about rampant corruption and authoritarianism, intensifying the exploitation of the periphery of Sudan and replacing public institutions with the ['political marketplace'](#), a concept that Alex de Waal discusses..

So how do you avoid this trap? Well, what I wrote at the end of my Civil Uprisings book, is that the two most important divisions in Sudanese politics that had to be resolved for a transition to democracy to succeed were between the centre and the periphery, and between the secularists and the advocates of religious politics.

Centre-periphery divide

The key failing of the past two uprisings was that they began in the urban riverain areas and they failed to transcend the divide between the centre and the marginalised regions. The pattern of exploitation of the periphery by the centre continued, and the civil wars along with it. This is not to say that these uprisings did not offer moments of possibility. In 1964 the man who brought Sudan's judges onto the street was Abd al-Majid Imam, a co-founder of today's Sudan Congress Party who hailed from the periphery. The revolutionary government that followed October appointed Clement Mboro, a southerner, Minister of Interior, and he immediately set about trying to reform what was admittedly then a much less inflated security apparatus. However, the core of the revolution was in Sudan's urban centre. Because the leftists and liberals of the cities were unable to revolutionise the periphery as well, those moments of new social possibility were lost, and the more conservative forces in Sudanese politics were able to mobilise the periphery against their opponents in the cities – whether that be Sadiq and Ahmad al-Mahdi marching the Ansar in Khartoum to strongarm the first transitional government into submission in 1965, or the Islamist governments bringing various militias trained in the periphery to crush urban dissidents since 1989.

Now, what is different in 2019? The most important point is that the revolutionary moment has gone on longer. In 1964 it took 5 days for the Abboud regime to fall, in 1985 it took the Nimeiri regime 11 days, and today it took the al-Bashir regime 4 months to fall. This shows how entrenched the al-Bashir regime was, but it has also meant that there has been much more time for today's revolutionary activists to call for more representation for marginalised groups within the transitional arrangement. It has also created more time for those marginalised on the basis of gender and age to demand representation. For example, the transitional government, although far from being fully gender balanced, has more representation of women than any other in Sudanese history,

and just yesterday we saw the appointment of Sudan's first female [chief justice](#).

Another factor to consider is that the rebellious periphery is a lot closer to home now than was the case in 1964 and 1985. Back then, armed opposition to the government was mainly restricted to the now seceded south, with the war in south Kordofan only just beginning in 1985.

Today, the rebellion has extended further into the north including of course Darfur, and the departed regime's perpetration of mass atrocities in that region has ensured that the issue of justice for the periphery is now one of the foremost slogans of the demonstrators even at the riverain centre.

Yet at the same time, General Hemedti, the pseudo-champion and arch-nemesis of today's revolution, has still been able to mobilise forces within the periphery through his notorious Rapid Support Force militia. He instructed them to act against today's urban revolutionaries, most notably of course during the awful massacre that occurred on 3 June this year.

In April, the urban political forces began to negotiate with the Transitional Military Council independently of the rebel groups within the Forces of Freedom and Change and Sudan Call. It looked like the classic scenario where regimes fall but regional divisions continue might repeat itself. However, the transitional government and rebels have now begun to implement peace talks. We still need to be cautious for two reasons – first of all, because post-uprising peace talks have happened before (as at the round table conference on the south in 1965), and failed to stop the ongoing conflict, and secondly because the rebels in Darfur and the other peripheries are made up of an array of different movements and factions, some of which have a more genuine commitment to democracy and social progress than others. As Alex de Waals [research](#) shows us, there has been a long term pattern of marketised politics whereby rebel agendas begin to mirror regime

agendas, and peace talks are simply used to divide wealth and resources between the government and its armed opponents. Rebel politics are also very male dominated, which sits awkwardly with an urban uprising that is trying to prioritise the representation of women. So in this context, it is important to note that groups such as the [Darfur Women's Protection Network](#) and the [General Coordination of Displaced People](#) and Refugees are demanding that they participate in the talks. More broadly, there is a question of whether the disjuncture between civil opposition in the urban centre, and armed opposition in the periphery, will continue.

Back during the 1964 October Revolution there were major urban protests in the leading cities of Darfur like Nyala and al-Ubayyid. The issue back then was that events developed very rapidly in Khartoum, and without the forms of electronic media we have today it was harder for the citizens of the urban centre to be aware of what was going on in the peripheries, and vice versa. The fact that both the uprising and the transition are happening in slow motion today, at least in contrast with the events of yester-year, is actually to the advantage of the periphery. And we are seeing peaceful protest having an impact on the periphery. Just a few weeks ago, the resistance committees in Nyala began to set up camps to educate the youth on [peaceful](#) demonstration, and following clashes in Nyala there were [solidarity](#) marches for Darfur all over Sudan. Similarly, parties like the Sudan Communist Party announced their [solidarity](#) with the recent protests against toxic gold mining in Talodi in South Kordofan, and ultimately these protests led the cabinet yesterday to [outlaw](#) the use of mercury in gold mining. Thus, there are positive signs of protest on the periphery feeding back into political action at the centre.

Secularism and religion

Coming to the second point, can the rift between secularism and religious politics be overcome? At the moment, this looks unlikely- given the Islamist character of the regime, the mass popular hostility to Islamism displayed during the urban protests, and the ambivalent reaction of the various non-NCP Islamists to the uprising itself.

Nevertheless, it is worth observing that in the great democratic wave that occurred slightly further north in 2011, the one country which escaped a return to authoritarianism was Tunisia, where both Islamists and secularists were willing to embrace parliamentary politics, and as research by the likes of [Cavatorta](#) and Merone has shown, Rashid Ghannushi's al-Nahda party has moved away from the old rhetoric of *hakimiyya* and Islamic states, towards an approach that is accommodating of pluralism and everyday politics. Elsewhere, in Syria, Libya and Egypt, military dictators and warlords exploited the divide between Islamists and secularists to justify returning to, or keeping an authoritarian mode of politics.

However, the case in Sudan is different, not just because Sudan has a very different cultural makeup to those other countries but because unlike the various movements associated with the Arab spring, the Sudanese uprising was an uprising against an Islamist regime.

We have seen the scenario both in Sudan's history and during the Arab Spring where there is a popular uprising against a secular or semi-secular regime, the Islamists give it lukewarm backing, and then win out in elections, but we have not seen whether this scenario can repeat itself when the regime that was overthrown was itself Islamist in character. It is worth observing that unlike Tunisia, Sudan has other religiously oriented, business orientated parties that might occupy the political space the Islamists vacate, such as the National Umma Party and Democratic Unionist Party which have acted as centre right in previous parliamentary systems in Sudan. Yet the Islamists still have considerable financial and media power, as well as influence within the

security services, important foreign allies and in the case of the Popular Congress Party, an ambiguous relationship with the most powerful of the Darfur rebel movements, the Justice and Equality Movement. At the moment they are, in Johnstonesque fashion, pushing for [early elections](#) in the hope that they will be able to capitalise on their existing financial and media power before the revolutionary transitional processes reverse the effects of 30 years of Islamist rule.

Islamism with moderation?

So, can they moderate, or will they just try to bring back the old system? The leadership of the Popular Congress Party (PCP) who represented the Islamist opposition have often been fond of highlighting their relationship with Rashid [al-Ghannushi](#), so as to associate themselves with the moderation of the al-Nahda party that he brought into democratic politics in Tunisia. Unfortunately, the Islamist opposition in Sudan have a somewhat more tainted history than al-Ghannushi in Tunisia. The leaders of the largest Islamist opposition groups, Ghazi Salahaddin and Ali al-Haj, were both major players in 1985 when the National Islamic Front refused to join the opposition National Alliance opposition umbrella during the last Intifada, and they were leading figures in the National Islamic Front when it engineered the coup that brought Omar al-Bashir into power in 1989. The pattern in Sudanese history is that politicians who participated in military regimes have been barred from participation in the subsequent parliamentary regimes, and already Ghazi Salahaddin and Ali al-Haj, along with others, have been the subjects of a [lawsuit](#) on account of their role in the overthrowing the 1989 democracy.

Generational revolutions

For the older generation of Islamists, the problematic issue is not so much the question of whether they have moderated on a philosophical level as much as their association with the old regime, its networks and

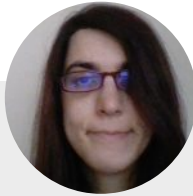
its crimes. And that is why, when the PCP vacillated throughout early 2019 over whether to back the uprising or not, that very much reflected a divide between the leadership under Ali al-Haj and the youth of the party, who embraced the generational character of the revolution, ignored their party leadership, which was composed purely of Islamists over the age of 60, and went to the streets. In the case of the Popular Congress Party, we can only hope that this generational divide will lead to the emergence of a far less exclusivist mode of religious politics.

That brings me back to the generational revolution. This same generational revolution has been happening within some of the other parties of the more conservative [opposition](#) over the last decade, with the youth of the National Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party protesting against the soft approach towards the regime of their aging patriarchs, both of whom have been in control of the party since the 1960s. One of the reasons that the popularity of the Sudan Congress Party has risen so much during the intifada is because it has relatively young leaders – it is the party of the [last Intifada](#), in effect.

The 1964 October Revolution saw a generational transition within a small elite – hopefully this time it will be more comprehensive. The university students today are more diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity and regional origin than was the case in the 1960s. They are not encumbered by the old way of doing politics that binds the older men, and they may well move away from the strict dichotomy of Islamism and secularism. But even if they do that, they still need to extend their revolution beyond the urban centres. It is also worth noting that Ali al-Haj has threatened to topple the transitional regime by setting up a '[shadow government](#)' in the regions, and that returns me to the original point that the urban democrats need to bring the peripheries into the new order if they are to prevent those peripheries being manipulated to challenge their revolution.

Note: The CRP blogs gives the views of the author, not the position of the Conflict Research Programme, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the UK Government.

About the author



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