

## SUDAN PROTESTORS DEMAND CIVILIAN RULE

By Donnelly McClelland

Sudan's main protest group on Sunday [14 April] demanded the immediate handover of power to a civilian transitional government, saying it would keep up the street demonstrations which ousted former President Omar al-Bashir last week to achieve its aims. *(Reuters)*

### ***Uncertainty and turmoil amid jubilation***

A sit-in in the Sudanese capital, which began on 6 April, was the culmination of a protest movement that began nearly four months ago, triggered by a worsening economic crisis. There had been tense moments during the sit-in when the military had been given orders by the former government to disperse the protestors, "at whatever cost", but the military had refused to do so, even going so far as to protect the protestors.



Despite the military's actions and attempts to appease the protestors, distrust abounds — protestors fear the generals will ultimately cheat them of their victory by thwarting a promised return to civilian rule. Salma Ali, a teacher who joined the protestors, explained to *The New York Times*, "They cut off the head, but the body is still there," referring to the al-Bashir regime.

There is also a very real concern among many that their country, one of the largest and poorest in Africa, could be condemned to the fate of Libya — where, after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, the country was plunged into a chaotic spiral from which it has yet to recover.

On Monday 15 April, the African Union (AU) demonstrated their support for the Sudanese protestors, when they threatened to suspend Sudan following last week's coup. The AU stated that the military council needed to hand over power to civilians within 15 days or face suspension. The AU will suspend "the participation of Sudan in all AU's activities until the restoration of constitutional order," the body's Peace and Security Council (PSC) said in a statement. The AU, which has 55 member states, added that "a military-led transition would be completely contrary to the aspirations of the people of Sudan."

### ***Lessons learned***

On 11 April, the protestors succeeded where numerous armed revolts elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East have failed, and ousted their despised autocratic president (who had ruled with an iron fist for 30 years, and was charged with committing genocide in the Darfur region during the nation's decades-long civil war), without having to resort to violence. Many have referred to the opposition's revolt in Sudan (and recently also in Algeria) as the second 'Arab Spring'. But a key feature of the opposition protests in Algeria and Sudan has been the perseverance of peaceful resistance, not giving the police or military an 'excuse' to resort to violence in response. There have been incidents of violent repression, but not on the scale seen in Libya, Egypt or Syria. It would appear that the protestors have learnt and put into practice some valuable lessons from the first 'Arab Spring' (of 2011).

The protest movement in Sudan that ultimately forced Mr Bashir from power was led by a new group, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), which was born among Sudan's frustrated middle class. It was formed in 2016 and includes an array of professional groups including doctors, lawyers, journalists, university professors and engineers.

This group succeeded in harnessing the wave of fury that erupted during a protest over the soaring price of bread in December and shaped it into a sustained mass movement. Part of their success has been in the relative anonymity of their leaders who have, with few exceptions, remained secret to avoid arrest. That veil of secrecy has gradually lifted in recent days, as the military and protestors have negotiated the shape of an interim government to steer the country until elections can take place.

The pro-opposition umbrella group says it was established to counter Sudan's mainstream trade unions which stood accused of being pro-government. In 2018, with inflation rising and the value of the national currency falling, the SPA was at the forefront of campaigning for a national minimum wage. But its profile was raised on 1 January when it published a "Declaration of Freedom and Change", calling for "the immediate unconditional departure of Mr Bashir and his regime". It has since listed more than 20 civil society groups and opposition parties that have signed up to the declaration.

### ***Challenges ahead***

There have been some key disagreements between the transitional military council and the opposition to date. The two sides disagree on the length of the transition period, but the military has agreed that civilians should run all ministries except the defence and the interior ministries. The civilian opposition group want a longer transition period to allow sufficient time for the country's political culture – underdeveloped after years of autocracy – to mature so that the elections are a success. Commentators point to Egypt and Libya as examples of countries where elections were held too quickly after a revolution, which resulted in the democratic process being undermined.

The main sticking point, however, is who would really be in charge — whether the military council would enjoy veto power, and therefore effective control, over a civilian prime minister. At this point, trust is hard-won and easily lost. If those who continue to demonstrate outside the military headquarters were forcibly dispersed, that trust would be shattered, but thus far, the transitional military council has promised this will not happen.

Many concessions have already been made – the arrest of former government figures, new heads of the army, police and the security service, and a promise the opposition can choose a new prime minister. What many are wondering is where the line will be drawn – between where the demonstrators are satisfied their demands will be met, and the point when the military leaders feel they cannot give any more. This is a delicate balance that is currently being sought between various representatives.

An additional concern is the role that powerful regional allies, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), may play in the shaping of the future government. The leader of the interim government, Lt Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, has close ties to Saudi Arabia, which provides Sudan with vital supplies of subsidised oil. General al-Burhan was, until recently, leading the contingent of Sudanese troops fighting in Yemen under the Saudi-led coalition. The UAE state news agency *WAM* wrote of Burhan's nomination: "[it] reflects the ambitions of the brotherly people of Sudan for security, stability and development." On Sunday [14 April], Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates issued statements backing the military council, with Riyadh urging the Sudanese "to give priority to the national interest".

Michael Woldemariam, assistant professor of international relations at Boston University, in an interview with *Al Jazeera*, cautioned: "External powers will have to be careful about not wading into Sudanese politics too directly. It will trigger a backlash from the Sudanese people, who are rightly demanding that they be the sole owners of their transition."

Huge changes came to Sudan in just a few days, but the protestors want more – to ensure that the risks they have taken will shape the future of their country for the better.

### ***FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE***

Proverbs 16:7 says: "When the LORD takes pleasure in anyone's way, He causes their enemies to make peace with them." The dramatic, almost miraculous resolution to the months of peaceful protest in Sudan seems to indicate an example of this verse in practice. The Lord honours those who honour and uphold His principles, even if they are not actively following Him.

The first 'Arab Spring' created an irreversible platform for the Gospel to be proclaimed in countries and across a region that had previously been quite 'closed' and resistant. May this second 'Arab Spring' provide a similar opportunity for the Gospel to penetrate hearts and minds. Sudanese believers have often faced severe persecution under Mr Bashir's government, as it strictly implemented a policy of 'one religion, one culture and one language'. Since the fall of Mr Bashir, Sudanese Christians are cautiously optimistic. There are no guarantees regarding Sudan's future leader, but it is their prayer that "the next leaders of Sudan will commit to allowing Christians and other religious minorities the ability to live out their faith freely".

## **PRAY**

- **For a peaceful leadership transition**
- **For the desires of the Sudanese people to be honoured**
- **For a season of spiritual openness in Sudan, and hearts to be receptive to the Gospel**

## **IMAGE SOURCE:**

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