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Sudan Protests:

Background and International Response

Policy Analysis Unit

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Policy Analysis Unit

The Policy Analysis Unit is the Center's department dedicated to the study of the region's most pressing current affairs. An integral and vital part of the ACRPS' activities, it offers academically rigorous analysis on issues that are relevant and useful to the public, academics and policy-makers of the Arab region and beyond. The Policy Analysis Unit draws on the collaborative efforts of a number of scholars based within and outside the ACRPS. It produces three of the Center's publication series: Assessment Report, Policy Analysis, and Case Analysis reports.

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Introduction

Popular protests calling for the resignation of President Omar al-Bashir in Sudan continue. According to Amnesty International, 37 people have already been shot dead by security forces, yet there have been no signs to say that the demonstrations are coming to an end nor that the authorities will make any concessions. Despite the continuing protests, the regime retains full control of the capital and has so far succeeded in preventing major demonstrations by pre-emptive intervention or directly suppressing them. Conversely, protests have begun to shift from sporadic outbreaks to somewhat organized events. The (unofficial) trade union syndicate, which was publicly assembled after the outburst of protests and includes doctors, engineers, pharmacists, lawyers, university professors, journalists and others, organized a march to the Republican Palace on 25 December 2018 to deliver a petition demanding the president's resignation, but the security forces broke up the march. A secret command seems to be coordinating protests that have spontaneously erupted in the provinces and spread to Khartoum in less than 24 hours. This is in contrast to previous uprisings in Sudan, which were launched from the capital and then spread across the provinces.

What is Behind the Protests?

Economic hardship, and specifically the government's decision to raise bread prices, was the principle cause of protests in the north-eastern working-class railway city of Atbara, 310 kilometers from the capital. The protests brought to mind the April 1985 uprising that toppled the regime of former President Gaafar Nimeiry (1969-1985) when he announced policies in line with the World Bank's recommendations for austerity and the cutting of bread and fuel subsidies.

The current crisis facing the regime is the result of a series of measures that began at the end of 2017. These measures followed the first budget announced by the so-called National Reconciliation Government headed by the Vice-President, Lieutenant General Bakri Hassan Saleh. This Government's Minister of Finance is also from a military background; i.e. with no experience in economics. Once the budget was announced, the currency began to depreciate rapidly. The US decision to lift most of the economic sanctions imposed on Sudan in early 2017 did not help the situation. The government responded by cracking down on money supply in the markets, hoping to curb the informal currency trade. But this policy has caused great hardship for citizens, on top of high prices and salaries that do not cover even essentials. Long queues for bread and fuel aside, people must now also brave the crowds to withdraw money from banks. This reached a high point at Eid al-Adha last year, when many could not withdraw their deposits or receive their salaries. The country appeared to be facing complete paralysis, and the regime seemed indifferent to it. Instead it took it upon itself to amend the constitution to allow Bashir to serve another term from 2020.

The tension was compounded by the disappointment that the national dialogue announced by President al-Bashir in early 2014 did not yield positive results. The regime refused to make any real



concessions in the dialogue sessions or even to respond to the opposition's demand to postpone the 2015 elections until a new constitution and fair electoral procedures were agreed. Some of the most important participants in the dialogue ended up facing arrest, such as former Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi.

Under these conditions it took no more than a spark for the protests to erupt. President Bashir tried to contain the situation by appointing a new prime minister in September 2018. But the new government retained most of its former ministers, unable to stop the declining exchange rate or control the prices of commodities, but instead raised the price of bread and fuel prices, a move which proved to be the final straw.

Regime Cohesion

The outbreak of continued demonstrations created a new playing field, increasing the opposition's confidence in its ability to challenge the regime for the first time since 1990. The regime has also appeared largely isolated; army units have refrained from cracking down on demonstrations in several cities, and the Janjawid militias (in whom the regime invested to suppress the Darfur rebellion from 2003) have announced they will not get involved in stifling the protests. It has lost large swathes of its supporters, including some important party leaders, because of the president's narrow circle of authority and his policies directed at serving this exclusivity.

Yet, the regime has remained cohesive. There have been no defections in the army, the main base of Bashir's rule. This may partly be due to the rhetoric adopted by some speakers threatening to "uproot" and punish the Islamists, regardless of whether they were supporters of the regime or defectors, and demanding to "purge" state institutions, especially the military, of cadres appointed by the regime. Some have even symbolically hung an effigy from a bridge in a clear threat of retaliation should the regime fall.

Civilians in military uniforms have also been seen helping to suppress the demonstrations. These groups are believed to be part of the so-called "People's Police", regime supporters who previously performed duties similar to those of the Saudi "Morality Police". At the same time, the regime has stepped up its repressive policies and come down on demonstrators with an iron fist, including arrests, house raids and use of live ammunition.

Fear of the Unknown

The balance between the escalation of protests on the one hand, and the effectiveness of the repressive measures taken by the regime and fear of the unknown on the other, reflects the current stalemate. Although the protests have stripped the regime of its legitimacy and have robbed it of most of its public support base, fear – especially among the urban middle class – of "chaos" and insecurity if the regime collapses without consensus on an alternative will curb the rush towards



change. The regime has recently adopted a rhetoric warning of chaos, drawing comparisons with Yemen, Syria, and Libya. This scenario is unlikely because there are no regional forces willing to enter into a civil conflict in the event that it occurs, and because there are institutions and political parties in Sudan capable of engaging in dialogue. Sudan has tried pluralism and competitive elections several times, and attempts at democracy have always ended with a military coup. But the civil wars took place under the shadow of military rule, not under democracy.

The regime weaponized the fear of chaos and violence – alongside violent repression – to prevent a previous uprising in September 2013. They did this by promoting the idea that groups belonging to armed rebel militias were the ones leading the demonstrations and responsible for the arson and looting that accompanied them. In the current uprising, it is trying to follow the same strategy – but apparently, this time, with less success.

International Consensus Behind the Regime

Paradoxically, the regime enjoys moderate support from all conflicting regional and international powers. While no country is willing to fight for it, no country seems keen to support the popular uprising against it. Saudi Arabia and the UAE fear the fall of a regime that is fighting alongside them in Yemen. It is well-known that Sudan was one of the few countries to respond to Saudi's call for ground troops to be sent to fight the Houthi rebels. The counterrevolutionary countries, such as Egypt, fear the success of any new popular revolution in the region that could breathe new life into the Arab Spring. On the other hand, the Sudanese regime enjoys clear Turkish support, as a result of the strong relations it has established with Ankara, especially in the last few years. Qatar does not support any action leading to the overthrow of the regime, which has refused to join the blockade despite Saudi pressure. It seems that the Russia-Iran axis also supports it, especially after the Sudanese president's recent visit to Damascus. He was the first Arab leader to visit Syria since the revolution broke out, opening the door for a "normalization" with the Syrian regime led by the UAE.

The regime also enjoys strong relations with China, which has stood by it since it came to power in June 1989 even under the international isolation imposed by the United States and its regional allies. China's support was pivotal in enabling the regime to support the armed insurgencies that overthrew the Ethiopian and Chadian regimes in 1991, at a time when Sudan was largely isolated because of its position on the 1991 Gulf War and stood accused of sponsoring terrorism. China (together with Malaysia) played a pivotal role in Sudan's oil extraction efforts at the end of the 1990s, setting a global precedent as the first time that non-Western companies extracted, processed and marketed oil. This allowed the regime to tighten its grip on power because of the financial resources garnered from oil exports. The protests also come at a time when Washington is reluctant to encourage any new changes in the region. US relations with the regime in Khartoum have also improved after resolving the most serious issues that led to its isolation and sanctions, namely its support for terrorism and the South Sudan question, which ended with its independence in 2011.



Conclusion

The international and regional orders passively support Omar Bashir's regime. The countries that support him have not lent him economic support during the current crisis, and will not intervene directly. Therefore, internal balances remain the principal factor in resolving the conflict. The regime of former President Gaafar Nimeiry collapsed even as he was being hosted by the White House. The matter rests on the response of the army; the possibility of reaching a compromise which sees Bashir relinquish power; the formation of a national unity government (including opposition forces) to see the country through a transitional stage, during which a national dialogue and a new constitution should be prepared; and elections that enable a real democratic transformation. However, all evidence indicates that these conditions have not yet been met and this outcome remains far from guaranteed.