

Sudan-The Sudans: after the divide

Sudan is hungry for change, but who will take on Omar al-Bashir?

The regime has many critics but a fragmented opposition and harsh crackdowns by the state have left a revolution in need of a leader

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Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, who has been in power for 25 years. Photograph: Phillip DHill/epa/Corbis

[David Smith](#) in Khartoum

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On a balmy evening in Khartoum, waiters glided across a clipped, floodlit lawn to serve a well-heeled crowd canapés of chicken, salmon and shrimp. It was the opening night of a film festival and, after some turgid speeches, guests gathered under the stars to watch a [biopic of](#)

[Patrice Lumumba](#), the Congolese independence fighter who overthrew a brutal and despotic regime.

For some Sudanese members of the audience, the story struck a chord. “We don’t have anyone like that who can inspire people and lead the opposition,” said Hatim Musa Adulaziz, an administrator. “People say yes, the government is bad, but they don’t see an alternative. This gives lifeblood to the ruling party. If we had someone like Lumumba, it would bring opposition parties together and inspire and encourage the young generation.”

In Sudan, which borders Egypt and Libya among others, there is a revolution waiting to happen, a revolution in need of a leader. The economy is at its lowest ebb for decades following the [breakaway of the oil-rich south](#) in 2011, and the pressure of US sanctions, leaving millions hungry and without work. Hostility is widespread towards Omar al-Bashir, a president who regularly locks up activists and censors journalists and is the only sitting head of state [indicted for genocide](#), war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Last month it was [announced](#) that Bashir, already in power for 25 years, will run in a general election next April that he is certain to win, with the main opposition parties likely to boycott a poll they see as unfree and unfair. When Blaise Compaoré, the president of Burkina Faso, recently made a similar attempt to extend his iron rule of 27 years, it was [shattered by a popular revolt](#) and scattered like blossom on the wind.

Yet although Bashir is teetering, the next act in Africa’s third biggest country is far from certain. He has grabbed economic lifelines from the likes of China, Iran and Qatar, and is said to increasingly rely on the intelligence and security service and the Janjaweed militia – who made their name terrorising Darfur – for [his personal protection](#). For years he has honed the art of divide and rule to exploit ethnic tensions, while many of Sudan’s would-be leaders have gone into exile.



Anti-government protesters take to the streets in Sudan in September 2013. Photograph: Khalil Hamra/AP

Protests and violence

Sudan has overthrown military regimes twice before, in 1964 and 1985, and in September last year it seemed that Bashir's moment of reckoning had come. Thousands took to the streets in protest, ostensibly against a hike in fuel prices, but there were all the makings of insurrection. The state responded with the cold-blooded [slaughter of nearly 200 civilians](#), many said to have been shot in the forehead as they stood, along with at least 800 arrests and a media blackout. A year later, many of the suspected ringleaders were rounded up to prevent them marking the anniversary.

Ghazi Salahuddin Atabani, an adviser to Bashir until they fell out over the incident, confirms that there was panic at the heart of government, a dread that the Arab Spring movement had arrived in [Sudan](#). "That's very true," he told the Guardian in an interview at his spacious home by the Nile. "That's why the response was so harsh. They kept saying if another uprising takes place, they will crush it."

The tactic appears to have worked, at least for now. Atabani added: "I think the Sudanese public is still in a state of shock about the death

toll. They're frightened. It's still in their minds. I wouldn't expect a significant uprising for the next two years.”

Longstanding divisions along ethnic, sectarian and political lines also mitigate against a revolution, he believes. “It's still a nation in the making. We haven't reached a nation state and we need to unite on many things. We have seen the south break away and theoretically you could have other parts drift away. It's a crucial moment in our history: statesmanship is what we lack.”

Holding on to power

Bashir's statesmanly potential has been severely curtailed, however, since the international criminal court [issued an arrest warrant](#) for him five years ago. The court ordered him to face charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity after a campaign of killing, torture and rape against civilians in [Darfur](#), where hundreds of thousands have died and millions been displaced in a [decade of fighting](#) between government and rebels. Judges later added three counts of genocide.

One unintended consequence, analysts say, is that 70-year-old Bashir is determined to cling to power at all costs because he fears any successor might hand him over to The Hague. The climate of fear and paranoia is pervasive: uniformed soldiers in military vehicles can be seen patrolling the dusty streets of Khartoum daily. Even the Janjaweed, effectively a group of bandits and mercenaries, have been paraded through the capital. Meanwhile Bashir's planes [continue to bomb](#) his own people in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, seemingly ignored by a distracted world.

Atabani likens the president's grip on the military and security apparatus, and the emasculation of his National Congress Party, to [Vladimir Putin](#) in Russia. But in person, he confides, Bashir is less intimidating. “He is amicable, likeable and generous. He doesn't strike you as a dictator. But if you empower someone too much, they tend to develop dictatorial tendencies. If you create a presidential system without a strong parliament, you create a despot.”

A rallying figure

Some here argue that Atabani himself is the alternative and the rallying figure the nation needs. The urbane medical doctor, who has a PhD in clinical biochemistry from Surrey University in Guildford, has founded a breakaway party that calls for democratic reforms likely to win favour in the west. But sceptics suggest that, at 63, he lacks traction with the new generation and question why he stood at Bashir's side for two decades. "It's a case of wisdom after the event," he admitted. "I can see now I should have done it 10 years ago. I'm now much more vocal than I used to be."

People do not want to go out and die like lambs. People would rather go out and die for the future of their children and grandchildren

Weak and divided, all opposition political parties have some way to go to convince an exhausted, impatient people that they offer a credible alternative to the status quo.

Dr Amin Mekki Medani, 72, a human rights lawyer and president of the Confederation of Sudanese Civil Society Organisations, said: "We really need a consensus on who would replace this government and that, I must admit, is not on the table at the moment.

"People do not want to go out and die like lambs. People would rather go out and die for the future of their children and grandchildren. They need some sort of security of vision – otherwise it's just massacres."

Medani was speaking before travelling to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia where he was among signatories of an agreement aimed at unifying opposition to Bashir. He was arrested on his return at around midnight on Saturday and is now being held by the National Intelligence and Security Service.

His son, Waleed, 35, said: "They came in a pickup, about seven of them. As he came home, he saw them parked in the garage downstairs. He immediately gave us a call because he would have to leave with them. The only good thing to say is their approach was not aggressive or violent or intimidatory in any way, but they did not show any documents or an arrest warrant."

Medani is diabetic and Waleed was eventually allowed to hand over insulin as well as underwear to be passed on to him.

“We’re just hoping for the best,” he said. “We’re talking to people who’ve been detained in the past and they said the place where it happens is fine and clean. We hope there’s no mistreatment happening.”

Farouk Abu Issa, 81, head of the National Consensus Forces, an umbrella group of Sudan’s main opposition parties, was also reportedly detained on Saturday night.

A new generation

Young people have shown their willingness to go to the front line. Sadiaelshiek Kuodk, a 22-year-old psychology student, points beneath an orange headscarf to a pyramid-shaped scar on her forehead – caused by a baton, she says, wielded by the National Intelligence and Security Service during a July demonstration outside parliament against the war in [Darfur](#).

Koudk, a Darfuri whose family are refugees in eastern Chad, recalled: “They interrogated me while I was still bleeding. There was no help. They asked me about my tribe and why I was taking photos. I felt like I do not belong to this place. They were hitting me in my face with their hands. They said to me, ‘Your people are repellent’.”

Last month, she continued, she was among Darfuri female students [forcibly evicted](#) from their university hall of residence in Khartoum. Many were arrested, tortured, sexually harassed and racially abused by the police and security service, she alleged.



Anger at the funeral of an activist killed by security services during the September 2013 protests. Photograph: Khalil Hamra/AP

Sitting in an upmarket garden restaurant in Khartoum, Koudk, who dresses fashionably and carries a Samsung smartphone, points out that she was born after Bashir came to power and has known no other leader. Two of her uncles and four of her cousins were killed in Darfur, while her 18-year-old brother was injured and must now use a walking stick. She said: “I feel very angry and I have to take revenge for my uncles and cousins and do something for the other members of the family who are still alive. If the regime changes, we can make a peaceful country and build a Sudan without racism and discrimination.”

Koudk belongs to a grassroots movement called [Girifna](#) – Arabic for “We are fed up” – formed before the [last election four years ago](#). It chose orange for its colour and the V-for-victory sign as a logo, and has spread its gospel of non-violent resistance through social media as well as old fashioned pamphlets, graffiti and wrist bands.

Ahmed Mahmoud, 27, a film maker and former rapper, explained: “In Girifna we believe sarcasm is the key to breaking fear – we make fun of the regime. But we’ve had our blows. Since 2012 the government

directly targeted Girifna and almost destroyed it completely. Many members were arrested and tortured and forced to leave the country.”

Mahmoud himself was detained for 12 days in 2011. His head was shaved and he was subjected to electric shocks, beaten with plastic sticks and forced to eat and sleep on the floor with 40 others in one corner of a room. “Most of the questions were, ‘Are you a communist?’” he recalled. “One of us was from Darfur and he was beaten the worst and almost died.”

An uprising is both necessary and inevitable in Sudan, he believes. “It is bound to happen. There’s no other way to change the course of action. The daily living, education, cultural life – everything is deteriorating. I started in engineering and it’s either me going to Saudi Arabia or knowing someone to get a decent job. People graduate with an idea to move abroad; there are no jobs here.”

‘All hell will break loose’

Some 4,000 qualified teachers and doctors have left Sudan in the past four months alone, according to the opposition Umma party. The economy is moribund as it battles a severe shortage of hard currency – crucial to pay for imports of food and medicine – following the loss of three quarters of oil production due to South Sudan’s independence. Bashir is accused of failing to diversify the economy to compensate.

American trade sanctions – palpable in the absence of Apple, Google, McDonald’s and any functioning credit cards – have also begun to bite, largely cutting Sudan off from international financial markets. Inflation is at 40% and a kilogram of beef now costs around 9 US dollars, beyond the means of most. Unicef says more than 4.1 million children have acute humanitarian needs and over half a million are severely acutely malnourished – one of the [biggest and least reported hunger crises](#) in the world. To top it all, there is an influx of refugees from wartorn South Sudan. Yet most of the government budget is spent on security.

We just need one leader to trust and the youth will do the rest

Ripe for revolution? Perhaps. Educated, digitally literate revolutionaries face an uphill task to connect with the poor and marginalised in a vast country where only one in five has internet access. A western diplomat pointed out that Khartoum lacks a central public space that could become a rallying point comparable with Tiananmen or Tahrir squares. It will take something, or someone, special to unite urban and rural, Arabs and non-Arabs, competing political factions and different social classes under a rebel flag.

Awad Mohamed Awad, 51, a newspaper publisher and editor, said: “I believe people are upset with the government but also with the opposition. People say we lack a leader. We just need one leader to trust and the youth will do the rest. We’re still waiting for this heroic leader to show up, then we will push him.”

[Usamah Mohamed](#), 32, an activist with a strong online following, believes it can be done. He insisted: “Sudanese society has hyper-sociability. People are very connected with each other. Sudan is like a Facebook on the ground except we’re not poking each other on the street. Going to a neighbourhood and talking to people is quite easy. I can go anywhere in Khartoum and feel safe, including poor slums.”

Mohamed was [detained in 2012](#) and says he was beaten with pipes after live tweeting a protest then refusing to reveal the password to his phone. He was among hundreds of political prisoners ordered to sleep on the floor and eat food so rotten that it contained worms. The detainees were kept in a cell for two months and not allowed to step outside even for a few moments. Many fell ill.

“Something is going to happen,” Mohamed predicted. “The economy is the game changer. The government is incapable of strategy and solutions that will change things for the better. If the economy gets worse, all hell will break loose. People will not be able to afford anything and will reach a stage where they have nothing to lose.”