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The Sudanese Revolution: A Different Political Landscape and a New Generation Baptized in the Struggle for Change

By Yasir Arman, 8 February 2019

I would like to start by thanking Jason Mosley and the Northeast Africa Forum and the African Studies Centre at Oxford University for inviting me to speak today on "Sudan's Political Crisis: What's Next?"

Sudan is facing multiple crises of nation-building, democratization, social justice, gender equality and the need for sustainable development. All these require a paradigm shift and structural changes on the basis of a blueprint that has sufficient national consensus and will eventually lead to building a modern state on equal citizenship.

The ongoing non-violent Sudanese revolution is the widest peaceful mass movement that Sudan has ever witnessed since its independence in 1956. It has involved rural and urban Sudan, women, youth, students, professionals, political parties and movements, civil society groups, and activists from all walks of life, including anti-dam and anti-land grabbing movements and others. It has also attracted, in a limited way, some Islamists from the new and older generations who are for change. Protests have continued for almost two months, which has provided Sudan's political life with new blood, baptizing a new generation whose courage and abilities have re-energized the entire society and provided confidence that democratization and building a new Sudan is possible.

It is worth mentioning the wider participation of women and that the discourse of this new generation is generally embracing diversity, equal citizenship, anti-racism, and the other demands of this revolution. It is well summarized by one of the dominant slogans asking for "freedom, peace and justice", which are the cardinal issues challenging nation-building in Sudan. I believe the current revolution represents a great opportunity to resolve the multiple crises of Sudan. Additionally, the mass movement involved in this revolution have similarities in many ways to those who received Dr John Garang when he came back to Khartoum in 2005. They share the same dreams, sometimes chanting similar slogans.

Sudan has witnessed a short period of multipartism and a long period of dictatorship. The longest period of dictatorship and fascism has been under the current regime, which rules Sudan with the iron fist of political Islam ideology. The current revolution is a culmination of the immense sacrifices of the Sudanese people in rural and urban Sudan, especially by the marginalized and poor groups, including women, who are one of the main targets of political Islam. In different ways during this continuous process of revolution, the Sudanese masses have expressed publicly, for the first time, their anger regarding genocide and war crimes committed by the regime against Darfur, the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile as well as the responsibility of the regime in the secession of South Sudan. Although the current revolution has been triggered by the economic crisis, as of now, it has taken a full political shape with a very clear demand for Bashir and his regime to step down and open the way for a new interim democratic arrangement. Social media has helped the youth greatly in organizing and building a strong network, while also aiding in providing a degree of coordination and some sort of leadership among the activists.

The peaceful protests, which started on the 13th of December 2018 in Damazin town of Blue Nile, went into a higher level on the 19th of December in Atbara and Gadarif towns, and it took a qualitatively different shape when it involved the professionals on the 25th of December. It developed further when the professionals, the Sudan Call, the National Consensus Forces and others signed the Declaration of Freedom and Change that has constituted a center and a leadership for the revolution. The revolution also has witnessed a Sudanese Diaspora involvement all over the globe beyond the dichotomies of

ethnicity, religion and regions. This revolution has paved the way for a new national discourse. It is an opportunity for a correct nation-building discourse. It has taken us to the drawing board again where almost a century ago, in the 1924 revolution that was led by Sudanese leader Ali Abdelatif, mass peaceful demonstrations began for the first time in Sudan during the colonial period.

The regime has responded to the revolution with excessive levels of violence including killing more than 52 peaceful protesters with live bullets, inflicting wounds on hundreds, attacking hospitals and health clinics to prevent protesters from accessing medical care and arresting the wounded, as documented by the UK based television station, Channel 4. In addition, the regime has arrested approximately 2,000 people, including top political and professional leaders, activists and women leaders, and security forces have raided many homes in residential areas. At least four detainees were tortured to death. One of them, Ahmed Elkhier Awad el Kareem, a teacher from Eastern Sudan, was raped and tortured. A few prisoners have been released because of the lack of detention facilities.

The courage of the youth activists is having a huge impact on society. It gives a great hope in the renewal of political life after long decades under the fascism of political Islam. The revolution has also witnessed the return of the professionals in a way that has added value to the political scene and has opened the way for a civil rights movement that can involve marginalized and urban activists. Furthermore, this revolution has given rise to work in the field of creative arts and culture, birthed by a vision that embraces great values of human dignity and equality. It can also pave way for a strategic exit for the armed struggle into a peaceful movement to achieve a new Sudan of democracy, equal citizenship, and social justice.

The center that is leading the revolution is fragile as it has been newly established, but there are many efforts to consolidate it to respond effectively to the requirements of a successful revolution. That is a process, which can never be a single event, but one that must witness ups and downs. This is expected in such a process, but it is clear that the involvement of the new generation has constituted the basis for a successful transition from dictatorship into democracy and from war into peace. Sudan has reached a point of no return, and it will never be the same again. Therefore, all those who are thinking in terms of business as usual, ought to revisit their position.

In the revolution of 1964 and the uprising of 1985, Sudan managed to achieve democratization without resolving issues of war and achieving peaceful settlement. This has been the cycle since independence, from dictatorship to democracy that has not been able to settle war issues. Unresolved war issues themselves, among other factors, will lead to the failure of a fragile democratic system. For our part, we have developed new ideas of how this peaceful revolution can resolve issues of war and achieve peace, hand in hand with democratization. It is also worth mentioning that a peaceful agreement with a dictatorship is never sustained, from our own experience. Democracy cannot be sustained without peace. Peace can never be sustainable without a democratic environment. These are the key lessons of 1964 and 1985 that need not be ignored.

The current revolution lacks the classical tools of transferring power from the old system into the hands of the new system. In 1964 and 1985, this was done through the democratic forces within the Sudanese army. As of now, the Sudanese army composition is different and complex as a result of many factors. There are also other forces outside of the army. In addition, trade unions have played a critical role in the past in bringing about a political strike and civil disobedience. This is not exactly the case today. Nevertheless, other steps are being discussed to compensate for the absence of the exact situation of 1964 and 1985. The contradictions within the ruling class are widening and the more the mass movement pressure increases, the more these contradictions increase too. The bottom line here, is that change is inevitable and is coming.

The main driving force is the mass movement, which is seeking to remove Bashir and his system. Interestingly, the ruling bankrupt class is seeking to remove Bashir and reproduce the old system. Thus they both meet temporarily, yet differ significantly in their final objectives.

The Sudanese situation is different from what is called the Arab Spring. One of the major forces leading the Arab Spring uprising was the Islamic movements, which constituted an important and integral part of it. In Sudan, this revolution is being led by national and democratic forces. It is the opposite of the Arab Spring. The leadership of the Arab Spring uprisings were not firmly settled in most cases regarding the role of arms and the peaceful character of the uprising. In Sudan, all political forces and mass movements, including the armed struggle movements, are very firm on the importance of keeping this revolutionary process peaceful and to involve more peaceful protestors until we overthrow the regime. This is important as it will ensure the democratic content of the transition. It has been proven beyond a doubt that peaceful struggle can yield more democratic results than any other means. Again, this does not nullify the importance of the armed struggle, taking it from its historical perspective as the means necessitated by the objective situation in the marginalized areas. Nevertheless, the situation in the urban areas is different. The peacefulness of the current revolution in Sudan is key to its success.

The marginalised forces need to develop their political discourse to realise their huge potential by peaceful means, as the armed struggle is a temporary phenomena necessitated by the historical circumstances, but the political struggle remains the principal one. The new social movement led by the youth and women, is a strategic ally of the marginalised forces, regardless of their ethnic or geographical background.

There are four forces leading the revolution and they constitute the core. They are namely; the new forces of youth, women, professionals, etc., the marginalized bloc, the traditional historical parties, and the progressive forces. This does not mean they can veto others who do not belong to these blocs. The coming together of these four forces in a robust manner is critical to achieving the objectives of the revolution that is underway.

Again, this revolution is not a product of today's events, it has deep roots in the soil, of the sacrifices of our people in the last 30 years and definitely beyond.

We must make a distinction between the system that has been built by the Sudanese Islamic movement over the last 30 years and the Islamic movement itself. We have to change the system totally and to retrieve the national and professional character of the state-institutions, especially the security sectors and other public institutions. We must have accountability for all crimes, address issues of corruption, return the resources of the people to the people, and allow no place for impunity. Yet, we should be careful. The Islamic movement is going to continue in one way or another, and a new generation of the Islamists will carry on their vision; however, they are required to accept the pillars of what can bring the Sudanese together on the basis of accountability, democracy and restructuring of the old system. We should welcome the Islamists who are for change, democratization and accountability. In fact, the Islamists, equally, have an opportunity to renew the Islamic movement in a new fashion that accepts building a modern state based on the principles of equal citizenship and democratic competition, provided that they take a clear position against their current experience.

The economy is the Achilles' heel of the Islamist regime and the economic crisis is largely a political crisis as a result of the nature of the parasitic, non-productive social group who are ruling the country and who are depending on looting the state resources, misdirecting and misusing economic resources on repression, wars and corruption. Also, the ruling clique has a narrow social base, and it cannot rule democratically. Therefore, the success of the revolution will involve adopting a different paradigm where resources are geared towards addressing the daily needs of the people with health, education, water, and housing as a priority, and will include economic plans that diversify resources and renovate the national economic projects, which have been destroyed by this regime especially in the agricultural sector, industry, etc. Reviving the economy is a top priority.

What do we need from the region and the international community?

Bashir and the regime are clinically dead no matter how much time it will take the Sudanese people to bury them. The regional and international communities should bet on the forces of the future. It is only those forces that can bring stability to the region and normalized relations with the international

community. Is it not the same Bashir who is wanted by the ICC? Is it not his very regime, which has been unable to resolve basic issues for over 30 years and has involved Sudan seriously in terrorism and internal wars? The regime is a producer of immigrants and it has been denying Sudanese citizens space in their own land. Between 5-8 million are either internally displaced or refugees, making them potential immigrants to Europe, the U.S. and elsewhere.

The international community needs to put an end to their strategic dialogue with Khartoum. What strategic dialogue can be achieved with a president who is wanted by the ICC and with a regime that commits genocide and war crimes? Bashir is worse than Robert Mugabe, who is not wanted by the ICC, and yet the international community refuses to engage in strategic dialogue with him, so why with Bashir? Taking Sudan off of the list of states that sponsor terrorism by the United States will only advance the cause of impunity, killing more Sudanese, sending out more immigrants, and creating greater regional instability. What can Bashir strategically do today with the international community that he did not do for the last 30 years as the only president of Sudan? Given the serious human rights violations against peaceful protestors and in support of peace, stability and democracy, we call upon those who believe in these values to stop their strategic dialogue with General Bashir and his regime and instead, help establish an independent international committee to investigate human rights violations.

In addition, they must recommend taking Sudan back to Item 4 in the Human Rights Council and appointing a new Rapporteur. The region and the international community should support the demand of the Sudanese people for a new democratic interim arrangement. On the peace process, the way it has been conducted, and its piecemeal approach will have no place in the new Sudanese political landscape given the huge impact of this revolution. Those who are in charge of these processes need to rethink seriously the way they are dealing with the Sudan issue. No one among the Sudanese national political forces will accept business as usual. The current peaceful revolution requires a totally new approach to Sudan by the regional and international community. The international media in the past, has ignored the Sudanese suffering. The current revolution has brought attention to the immense Sudanese suffering in the eyes and ears worldwide.

Lastly, to answer the question of this seminar, "What's Next?" We need to change direction. The status quo will never bring peace, democracy or stability. This revolution is a great opportunity in the history of Sudan for the renewal of our country in a new social, political, economic, and cultural dispensation. Sudan needs a new social contract to pursue its nation building in the correct parameters. That will definitely require the removal of Bashir and his system and opening the way for transformation and restructuring of the old system.

Once again, thank you.

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