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A Sudanese Arab Spring and the prospects for opposition unity

1. Economic turmoil and recent street protests have led some analysts and media commentators to speculate that Sudan is moving towards a popular uprising reminiscent of those witnessed in 1964 and 1985.
2. Despite the presence in Sudan of many of the preconditions that led to recent uprisings elsewhere the Middle East and North Africa, a Sudanese 'Arab Spring' is assessed as *unlikely* in the short-term (6-12 months) because of two sets of limiting factors:
 - a. There are severe restrictions on the opposition political parties that are leading efforts to remove Omar al-Bashir and the National Congress Party (NCP). Most lack sufficient financial resources, have large credibility deficits with voters, are facing increasing pressure from the security services, and – despite multiple political agreements – remain ideologically and regionally divided.
 - b. While relations between opposition parties, trade unions/guilds and CSOs are showing signs of improvement, prospects for future collaboration are limited by general suppression of trade union and CSO activity, generational barriers between traditional opposition parties and youth movements and the alienation of Islamists by CSO platforms for democratic change and secularisation.
3. Furthermore, if potential financial support from non-Paris Club creditors, such as China and Qatar, is forthcoming, the NCP is likely to further consolidate political power and crackdown on opposition.
4. Regime change does, however, become more likely if opposition parties and trade unions can work together and capitalise on the occurrence of one or more of the following scenarios:
 - a. Popular dissatisfaction with the economic crisis and NCP economic mismanagement reaches deeply into the middle class.
 - b. Self-inflicted NCP legitimacy crises arise from policy paralysis or intra-party factional conflict.
 - c. Bashir is forced to negotiate debt reduction with Paris Club creditors and accept the resulting social, political and civil reform conditionalities.
 - d. An escalation of expensive military offensives in contested border regions at a time of increasingly deep austerity measures.



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Preconditions of an Arab Spring-style regime change

President Omar al-Bashir has led Sudan for nearly quarter of a century and his National Congress Party dominates the political space. However, as economic crisis grips Sudan, attention is now shifting to the potential for opposition parties, trade unions and civil society organisations (CSOs) to marshal popular support for regime change or, at the very least, governance reform.

Street protests in January 2011, July 2012 and December 2012 led some commentators and CSOs to speculate that Sudan was experiencing its own 'Arab Spring'. Indeed, the recent New Dawn Charter, signed in Kampala by a number of opposition groups, calls for toppling the regime and 'preventing the exploitation of religion in politics'. Many of the key preconditions in other Arab Spring uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa are present in Sudan today:

- Disproportionately high youth unemployment rates (22% versus 11% in the general population).
- Escalating inflation (tracking 40% in Q4 2012).
- Endemic government corruption (Sudan is fourth from the bottom on Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perception Index).
- Excessive and sometimes violent suppression of civil and political rights.
- Long-term incumbency of a delegitimised authoritarian government.

Sudan has experienced both successful and unsuccessful popular uprisings since its 1956 independence. Many of these resulted from the erosion of state legitimacy by the confluence of serious economic turmoil, armed conflict with the south and governance crises (including entrenched corruption and heavy-handed security responses).

There are, however, a number of missing elements in Sudan's potential Arab Spring and glaring differences in the politico-religious context, the attitude of external powers and the magnitude of protests when compared to other recent uprisings in the region.

Sudan's ethno-political diversity, regionalised sectarian allegiances, highly factionalised opposition parties and Bashir's centralised, 'divide and rule' governance structure, renders the convergence of political agendas necessary for opposition parties and civil society unity difficult. Equally, the NCP dominance of Sudanese capital, industry and key patronage networks, state controlled media narrating existential threats to Islamic identity and armed conflict fatigue would all count in favour of the incumbent holding on to power.

For Bashir, high-stakes International Criminal Court charges are a strong enough incentive to retain power at perhaps any cost. There is little chance of the key external powers (China, the United States and the United Kingdom) supporting non-democratic attempts to remove him.

More importantly, the absence of a critical mass of civil disobedience and unity between civil society and political opposition forces raises a question mark over whether a Sudanese Arab Spring would result in regime change. The conjoining of opposition unity with a popular uprising is just as fundamental to a successful uprising today as it was to the overthrow of the Gaafar Nimeiri regime in 1985.

Critical mass uprising, if led by CSOs, may require those most affected by worsening economic collapse to support the democratic reform and liberal secularism platform of some CSOs and armed resistance groups. Arab nationalists and even moderate Islamists may oppose the NCP on grounds of poor economic stewardship, but this is unlikely to translate to open protest demanding Western secularism and liberal democracy. There is a perception of disjuncture between the experience of economic turmoil and the political solutions offered by CSOs. In contrast, many constituents living in greater Khartoum see the infrastructure development, industrial growth, import substitution (petroleum) and commercial improvement achieved between 1999 and 2010 as evidence of the NCP's economic acumen.

Of course, regime change might be precipitated by an internal NCP split and the formation of a new coalition before or at the scheduled 2015 elections. Failing this, change will most likely be precipitated by worsening economic conditions and require comprehensive collaboration between multiple opposition parties as well as strong public support from civil society organisations, interest groups and citizens.

Prospects for trade unions and CSOs to organise and, together with existing opposition parties, form part of a coherent and credible political opposition

Coherence and unity among political opposition parties is necessary for the formation of a robust parliamentary majority or transitional government and to include CSOs in any potential regime change. Prospects in this regard will most likely be influenced by the magnitude of economic collapse/stabilisation, security force suppression and escalation/de-escalation of armed conflict in contested border regions.

Opposition political parties

The poor performance of major opposition parties during periods of civil government continue to influence perceptions of credibility and raise questions for voters about the capacity of the National Umma Party (NUP) and Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to effectively run government. The numerous coalitions that governed in the periods 1956-58, 1964-69 and 1986-89 were characterised by political instability, factionalism and repeated coup attempts.

Sadiq al Mahdi's Umma Party-led coalition of 1966-67 experienced entrenched internal factionalism and shifting coalition partners. Multiparty coalitions struggled to find points of mutual interest, fought over government appointments and were challenged by national issues such as uneven regional development, the centrality of Arab nationalism and political Islam in state institutions and the southern insurgency. Mahdi's 1986-89 coalition government (formed after the overthrow of the Nimeiri regime) was similarly plagued by political instability: internal fracture over cabinet positions, dissension over Sharia and economic crisis emanating from the external debt inherited from Nimeiri.

Opposition effectiveness is essentially undermined by a lack of unity. Opposition political parties individually do not have sufficient support bases to form majority government and have had to rely upon coalitions. Historical sectarianism, highly factionalised political parties and al-Bashir's divide and rule governance legacy makes unity of the regional periphery difficult. With their respective sectarian roots in Islamic Ansar (NUP) and rival Khatmiyyah (DUP) and divergent regional and economic bases (agrarian versus commercial/industrial), efforts at cooperation have and continue to be tenuous.

Potentially irreconcilable political differences are even more evident when other opposition parties and the numerous breakaway factions of the DUP and NUP are factored into the equation of opposition collaboration. This includes the Sudanese Peoples' Liberation Movement North (SPLM-N), Popular Congress Party, the Sudanese Communist Party, the Nassrite Unionist Party, the Nassrite Arab Socialist Party, the three Ba'ath Party factions, the Sudanese National Alliance, the Justice Party and Movement of the New Democratic Forces.

There is disagreement over the means of achieving regime change – armed insurrection versus democratic change/popular uprising – and fundamental ideological, regional and generational faultlines remain unaddressed. Ideologies and political agendas of opposition parties span conservative political Islam to liberal sectarianism with cross cutting economic programmes from Arab capitalism to socialism.

Moderate Arab Islamists are trapped in between conservatives committed to Sharia and secularists of diverse religious affiliations in an environment where NCP security hardliners such as Nafie Ali Nafie continually underscore the alleged threat of Western secularism to Sudan's Islamic identity. While opposition can unify around dissatisfaction with how Bashir governs, NCP hardliners continue to effectively use religion as a political wedge to foster ideological cleavages in opposition ranks and cast secularism as an existential threat justifying a heightened security response.

Outside of government, opposition party credibility has been further eroded by inconsistent participation in political initiatives established to challenge Bashir, such as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA, formed 1989) and the National Consensus Forces (NCF, formed 2008). Despite limited participation in the recent New Dawn Charter and opportunistic, anti-NCP rhetoric stemming from efforts to capitalise on anti-austerity protests, the DUP and NUP have sporadically argued against a wholesale removal of the NCP from Sudanese politics. Mohamed Osman al-Mirghani's DUP entered into partnership with the first post-succession NCP government in the face of ardent internal opposition. NUP's Mahdi has previously indicated his willingness for the NCP to be part of the reform process.

Questions and doubts for other opposition parties (and potential coalition partners) and the Sudanese public are likely to be raised by these contradictions. Further question marks sit over whether the traditional opposition parties are merely seeking political opportunities to enrich their patronage networks, as opposed to addressing development disparities across the marginalised regions.

While the NDA demonstrated the ability for political parties, CSOs and armed movements to achieve a degree of unity, much of its political and strategic traction came from self-inflicted NCP crises. Foreign policy positions such as support for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait isolated Sudan and the dual-track suppression of political opponents in the north and military offensives in the south created ideal conditions for NDA unity.

In the same way, the opposition parties could be painted as 'the lesser of two evils' today if the NCP experiences further self-inflicted crises stemming from existing factional tensions within the party, which are particularly evident in contradictory foreign policy positions (for example, Foreign Minister Ali Ahmed Kharti's rebuke of Bashir over the docking of Iranian ships).

Trade unions and civil society organisations

Trade unions, professional guilds and student groups have played critical roles in popular uprisings in Sudan and, as such, have been tightly controlled by the Nimeiri and Bashir regimes. The Humanitarian Affairs Council exercises control over registration and unregistered CSO and trade union activities are illegal and subject to strict security responses.

Trade unions, student movements, women's rights groups and human rights NGOs are all subject to continued suppression through arrests, banning of political material and intimidation. Activists have accused the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) of severe breaches of human rights, including beating protesters and torturing prisoners. In many instances, groups have been infiltrated and taken over by those with sympathies to the NCP in order to dampen the challenge from civil society. CSOs are also subject to limitations on the receipt of foreign income.

These groups have been the targeted in renewed NISS operations as street protests increased throughout 2012. Members of youth movements such as Girifna (We are Fed Up), Sudan Change Now and Sharara (Sudanese Youth for Change), who have had an important organisational role in the protests, have directly experienced intimidation, violence and unlawful detention. The political platform of the student movement includes sweeping reforms to civil, government, security and judicial institutions. Without using the terminology of 'secularism', the student groups call for an end to the use of religion as a tool for persecution.

These youth/student networks have strong online profiles and international NGOs have gravitated towards these networks as a source of grassroots information on the situation in Khartoum and, to a lesser extent, Omdurman. Domestic CSO interaction with international NGOs is likely to be seized upon by the NISS and NCP as evidence of collaboration with the European Union, the United States and other external forces to undermine the Arab Islamic identity of Sudan.

CSOs have publically expressed scepticism about the historical performance of the major opposition parties during periods of civilian rule and their ability to become a credible and unified opposition. While opposition parties have acknowledged the growing importance of engaging with CSOs, there are generational and ideological barriers to greater collaboration.

Trade unions may be better placed to capitalise on the rising discontent associated with reduced living standards and economic hardship. Anti-government rhetoric may be more directly framed in terms of criticism of the NCP's ability to manage the finances of the country. Consolidating popular discontent around economic hardship rather than competing visions for Sudan's future governance structure and national identity may be more likely to drive popular protests of a scale that would threaten the legitimacy of the NCP or at least Bashir's inner circle. Unlike with the student networks, trade union criticism of the economic conditions experienced by workers is harder for the NCP to cast as part of a scheme on the part of Western, anti-Islamic forces to overthrow political Islam in Sudan.

Despite severe limitations on trade union activity, some unions have built relationships and jointly organised protests with the Communist Party of Sudan and SPLM-N. A limited number of trade union groups were directly involved in the signing of the New Dawn Charter including Trade Union Solidarity and the Sudanese Writers Union. Trade unions may also have a greater potential to effectively work alongside traditional opposition parties and cooperate in mobilising voters, as there is less incongruence between political platforms, less generational conflict and historical relationships remain in place.

The ability of trade unions to participate in broad-scale general strikes (similar to the uprising against Nimeiri) is, however, limited by the tight restrictions on union activity. After Bashir took power in 1989, restrictions were placed on the formation and operation of trade unions. Representing over 800,000 members, the state-controlled Sudan Workers Trade Union Federation (SWTUF) is the only authorised trade union federation. The activities of the SWTUF are highly regulated, its funds are controlled by the Auditor General and its activities are generally geared towards supporting the NCP. While the SWTUF has supported affiliate protests against NCP government actions such as privatisation of seaports or criticised the government over recent budget allocations, the criticism has usually been limited and targeted.

Sudanese CSO's peaceful reform agenda

There is a conflict between the stated commitment of Sudanese CSOs to a non-violent uprising and the proposal of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) to remove Bashir by force. This tension is representative of a broader contest in the opposition movement between the respective proponents advocating democratic change and armed struggle.

Signatories of the New Dawn Charter – including Girifna, Sudan Change Now and the Initiative against oppression for women – adopted a position whereby the preferred method of regime change is peaceful, non-violent civil disobedience. However, the door is still left open for the SRF to pursue armed interventions to topple the NCP. The endorsement by these CSOs of the New Dawn Charter, despite the allowance of SRF armed opposition, is more likely driven by their desire for unity than an approval of SRF tactics. Support for armed insurrection would undoubtedly lead to a security response that might threaten the existence of these organisations.

Another dimension of CSO commitment to non-violence may be an awareness that the optics of supporting armed groups may adversely impact international opinion of grassroots opposition (particularly among key aid donors, UN Security Council members, the African Union, international NGO networks and western creditors). At risk may be the moral currency and reputation that Sudanese CSOs may acutely understand as fundamental to winning over those in a position to encourage democratic reform.

Support for local CSOs may wane if the international narrative on Sudan changes from one of state suppression to one of civil war. The change in international opinion on the South when Garang and Machar split are not lost on Sudanese CSOs, which understand that the international community does not have the stomach to dissect a complex multiparty conflict.

However, in the event of wide-scale intensification in NISS detentions, violence and intimidation, it could be possible, for some CSOs to envisage and support a limited role for the armed movements 'to protect the uprising'.

The macro-political context

External efforts to stabilise the economy overlay the domestic context of Sudan's increasing opposition to the NCP. Economic stabilisation in its own right will undermine political opposition, but more importantly the way in which the NCP achieves stabilisation will dictate the extent of security crackdowns on opposition.

Assuming the NCP prioritises debt relief (as opposed to increasing austerity measures, reducing military expenditure or a more equitable distribution of limited government revenue), the options for the NCP to resolve the external debt crisis – which is subject to fierce internal NCP disagreement between the Nafie and Ali Osman Muhammed Taha factions – will have an important impact on framing security responses to growing political dissent.

Withstanding the complexity of debt relief scenarios, the NCP factions are likely to perceive two broad options to achieve macroeconomic stability through short- to medium-term debt relief:

- a. Debt reduction and limited concessional financing from Paris Club members and international finance institutions (IFIs), with key EU creditors leading debt negotiations.
- b. Debt rescheduling and new non-concessional loans from non-Paris Club states, including China and Qatar.

Pursing debt relief with Paris Club creditors and major IFIs will require compliance with conditionality requirements related to social, political and civil reform and be somewhat inconsistent with strong anti-Western rhetoric emanating from parts of the NCP.

The non-Paris Club route sidesteps the conditionality issues and would offer the NCP more space to employ a stronger security response against uprisings and political opposition and limit the imposition of deeper austerity measures. However, sole reliance on non-Paris club financing and debt relief may not provide sufficient relief and therefore would start to impact the capital and investments of Bashir's central patronage networks.

While the \$1.5 billion dollar loan guaranteed by the China National Petroleum Corp has provided Sudan some breathing room in terms of improving balance of payments, the reported Qatari guarantees of \$2 billion have not fully materialised and so far only \$500 million has been secured. Looking further ahead, the construction of the \$5-6 billion oil pipeline from Juba (South Sudan) to Port Lamu (Kenya) is likely to be a geopolitical game changer that over the longer term would put renewed economic pressure on Khartoum and a question mark over the value of existing and future Chinese infrastructure investment.

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