

CASE STUDY: SUDAN

Global State of Democracy 2023 Report

David Towriss

When early on the morning of 15 April 2023 intense fighting broke out in Khartoum between rival factions of Sudan's junta, it marked both the beginning of the country's descent into armed conflict and the reversal of its democratic revolution, which four years earlier had removed its long-serving autocratic leader, President Omar al-Bashir. The story of Sudan's revolution and the popular movement that brought it about is complex, and its successes and failures offer valuable insights into the promise and limitations of popular mobilization as a form of countervailing institution.

THE BIRTH OF SUDAN'S PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT

While the protests that sparked Sudan's revolution began in December 2018, it wasn't until 1 January 2019 that the pro-democracy movement formally came into being. It was on that date that a broad coalition of opposition organizations came together to sign the Declaration of Freedom and Change, a document that was to become the revolution's manifesto ([Forces of Freedom and Change 2019](#); [Radio Dabanga 2019](#)).

The signatories, later known as the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), spanned Sudan's political spectrum and included civil society organizations, political parties and provincial armed groups. They were led by the trade union alliance coordinating the protests, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA).

In the FFC's Declaration, these signatories committed themselves to a non-violent struggle, with the aim, inter alia, of removing President al-Bashir and forming a transitional government that would usher in a democratic and inclusive political system. It was a commitment to overhaul not just Sudan's political system but its social contract too ([Radio Dabanga 2019](#); [Elsheikh 2019](#); [Berridge et al. 2022](#)).

The story of Sudan's revolution and the popular movement that brought it about is complex, and its successes and failures offer valuable insights into the promise and limitations of popular mobilization as a form of countervailing institution.

THE POWER OF PROTEST

Much of what the movement subsequently achieved came through the power of protest, which it used to exact political accountability and empower Sudan's long-repressed citizenry. This potency was on full display in the early months of 2019, as the streets of Khartoum and other cities and towns across the country were filled with newly emboldened protesters prepared to defy state repression and call for their president to step down. It was a show of force not lost on al-Bashir's generals, who on 11 April 2019 removed him from power in a palace coup ([Hassan and Kodouda 2019](#); [Berridge 2020](#); [Berridge et al. 2022](#)).

In spurring the fall of al-Bashir, the protesters had forged an unlikely political opening in which a transition to democracy suddenly became possible.

In spurring the fall of al-Bashir, the protesters had forged an unlikely political opening in which a transition to democracy suddenly became possible. Bringing about the transition, however, required first negotiating and then governing with the coupists in a civilian–military power-sharing arrangement. The movement therefore had to evolve from one centred on mass action to one that was also capable of operating within the harsh environment of Sudanese politics. This process proved difficult, causing the FFC coalition to fragment, creating a divide between those engaged in the formal politics of the transition and the activists on the street ([Marovic and Hayder 2022](#); [Boswell 2022](#); [Berridge et al. 2022](#); [Lynch 2022](#)).

The fragmentation weakened the movement, but it did not end the protests, which until the outbreak of Sudan's armed conflict in April 2023 continued to be used by activists to sustain popular engagement with the revolution and to communicate their demands around the transition ([Marovic and Hayder 2022](#)). These protests proved to be effective in shaping perceptions of key political actors and developments both domestically and abroad ([de Waal 2023](#)).

MOBILIZING CAPACITY

Central to the success of the pro-democracy movement's mass actions was its ability to mobilize in the midst of harsh state repression, which included the killing, forced disappearance and rape of protesters ([United Nations 2022](#)). In this, it was greatly helped by the organizational structures and relationships that had been cultivated by the FFC's members prior to the uprising, particularly those of the SPA and the neighbourhood resistance committees (NRCs), a network of grassroots community support organizations ([Marovic and Hayder 2022](#)). The high levels of trust underpinning these relationships arose partly from the perceived apoliticism of both organizations (faith in political parties was low), but also because they showed themselves to be responsive to the material needs of professional and local communities. During the demonstrations this was reinforced through the culture of mutual aid that existed between protesters, in which they provided each other with food, shelter, medical assistance and protection from the military's brutality ([Hassan and Kodouda 2019](#); [Marovic and Hayder 2022](#)).

The movement also benefited from a period of intensive capacity building among opposition activists in the five years preceding the revolution, during which time they received training from civil society organizations in strategy, movement building and non-violent resistance. The latter proved particularly important in pivoting the movement away from Sudan's culture of violent resistance, which had hindered an attempted uprising in 2013. Through workshops and local initiatives, a commitment to peaceful change was diffused widely among activists, who later, during the protests, showed remarkable non-violent discipline in the face of relentless security force provocation—most notably the massacring of 120 protesters by security forces in Khartoum on 3 June 2019 (Henry 2019; Marovic and Hayder 2022; Berridge et al. 2022).

Important too was the protesters' diversity, for it was this that allowed them to credibly present themselves as the voice of the Sudanese people. Whereas previous uprisings in Sudan had been focused on the country's capital, Khartoum, the movement was able to mobilize demonstrators throughout the country and across Sudan's gender, ethnic and political lines, lending the demonstrations a truly national character (Hassan and Kodouda 2019; Berridge 2020). The task of maintaining unity in such diversity initially fell to the SPA, which coordinated the protests through its local activists and the NRCs, thereby connecting the middle-class professionals with the more impoverished grassroots. Later, as the influence of the SPA within the movement waned, the protests were coordinated by the NRCs (Marovic and Hayder 2022).

A LEADERSHIP VACUUM AND INTERNAL DIVISIONS

Protest, however, only took the pro-democracy movement so far. As noted above, transitioning Sudan to democracy after al-Bashir's deposition required the movement to first negotiate and then govern with the military coupists, political functions it was structurally ill-equipped to carry out. The FFC's coordinating organization, the SPA, was a broad, consensus-based association that was not designed to take political decisions, but the FFC's political parties lacked the legitimacy to provide authoritative political leadership. The leadership vacuum that resulted was compounded by the fractures that appeared within the coalition, as the cut and thrust of negotiations with the military began to expose political rivalries and philosophical differences (most notably over the future role of the military in the transition) (Berridge et al. 2022; Lynch 2022; Marovic and Hayder 2022; Khalafallah 2023).

As a consequence of these internal weaknesses, the FFC's decision making around the negotiations was slow and not helped in this regard by the political inexperience of its leaders, many of whom had been drawn from Sudan's diaspora and so had little practical knowledge of the country's politics. The result was that the military was often able to outmanoeuvre the FFC negotiators, who through their compromises began to lose the confidence of the activists on the street (the agreement that the head of the transitional

Transitioning Sudan to democracy after al-Bashir's deposition required the movement to first negotiate and then govern with the military coupists, political functions it was structurally ill-equipped to carry out.

government should rotate between civilian and military leaders was particularly controversial among activists). It was a dynamic that continued after FFC leaders took up their seats in the transitional government (Lynch 2022; Berridge et al. 2022; Marovic and Hayder 2022; Saeed 2023).

Arguably the greatest obstacle the movement has faced, however, was the entrenched political and economic power enjoyed by its military adversaries.

ENTRENCHED MILITARY POWER

Arguably the greatest obstacle the movement has faced, however, was the entrenched political and economic power enjoyed by its military adversaries. Al-Bashir had left behind a highly centralized and securitized state, in which senior members of the military controlled many of Sudan's state and private institutions (Hassan and Kodouda 2019; Cartier, Kahan and Zukin 2022; Khalafallah 2023). This provided the junta with the clout to resist the democratic reforms that threatened their privileged status (Berridge 2023). Indeed, the extent of their power was such that it gave them an effective veto over the transitional process. This was starkly displayed in the October 2021 military coup carried out against the civilian members of the transitional government, shortly before they were due to assume leadership of the government and on the eve of the publication of a government report into corruption in military-affiliated companies (de Waal 2023). It was evident again in April 2023, when the junta factions began fighting each other over security sector reforms proposed under a deal intended to revive the transition (Stigant 2023). The impact of these power disparities was made more acute by the failure of regional and international actors to use their influence to rein in the military leaders (de Waal 2023; Soliman and Hassan 2023; Saeed 2023).

LESSONS LEARNED

Sudan's revolution has become a source of inspiration for pro-democracy activists around the world, but what are the lessons that they should take from it?

1. Mass protest can be a highly potent tool for empowering citizens and exacting political accountability, even in a highly authoritarian context.
2. Mobilizing mass protests in the face of state repression requires the mobilizers to command the trust and confidence of the protesters they are mobilizing. This takes time to develop but can be facilitated through mutual aid.
3. Maintaining non-violent discipline during demonstrations is critical to the success of a pro-democracy movement. It demands a strong commitment to peaceful change among all of its members.

4. The popular legitimacy of a movement depends on its ability to mobilize across social cleavages. Coordinating and maintaining the unity of a diverse movement requires strong organizational structures that connect and give voice to its constituencies.
5. When a pro-democracy movement moves from the street to the formal political arena, it has to take on a very different set of functions. A movement that fails to adapt is liable to fracture.
6. While members of the diaspora often possess skills and resources that are highly valuable to a pro-democracy movement, they may lack important local knowledge. This can weaken a movement that is overly dependent on such individuals.
7. Local ownership of democratic transitions is essential, but where the international community fails to restrain a powerful and intransigent regime, it leaves the process vulnerable to derailment.
8. Where a democratic transition follows a long dictatorship, it is likely to have to contend with a powerful security apparatus. The success of such a transition requires the development and implementation of a gradual strategy that ensures security institutions play a positive role in the process and do not act as spoilers.

ABBREVIATIONS

FFC	Forces of Freedom and Change
NRC	Neighbourhood resistance committee
SPA	Sudanese Professionals Association

REFERENCES

- Berridge, W. J., 'Briefing: The uprising in Sudan', *African Affairs*, 119/474 (2020), pp. 164–76, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adz015>>
- , 'Omar al-Bashir brutalised Sudan – How his 30-year legacy is playing out today', *The Conversation*, 25 April 2023, <<http://theconversation.com/omar-al-bashir-brutalised-sudan-how-his-30-year-legacy-is-playing-out-today-204391>>, accessed 14 August 2023
- Berridge, W., Lynch, J., Makawi, R. and de Waal, A., *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy: The Promise and Betrayal of a People's Revolution* (Glasgow: Hurst Publishers, 2022), <<https://www.hurstpublishers.com/book/sudans-unfinished-democracy>>, accessed 14 August 2023
- Boswell, A., 'A breakthrough in Sudan's impasse?', International Crisis Group, 12 August 2022, <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/breakthrough-sudans-impasse>>, accessed 14 August 2023
- Cartier, C., Kahan, E. and Zukin, I., 'Breaking the bank: How military control of the economy obstructs democracy in Sudan', C4ADS, 29 June 2022, <<https://c4ads.org/reports/breaking-the-bank>>, accessed 16 August 2023
- de Waal, A., 'Sudan's descent into chaos: What Washington and its Arab partners must do to stop the shootout', *Foreign Affairs*, 27 April 2023, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/sudan/sudans-descent-chaos>>, accessed 31 May 2023
- Elsheikh, E., 'Sudan after revolt: Reimagining society, surviving vengeance', *Critical Times*, 2/3 (2019), pp. 466–78, <<https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-7862560>>
- Forces of Freedom and Change, 'Declaration of Freedom and Change', 2019, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20190716004035/https://www.dabangasudan.org/uploads/media/5cf94b02b2055.pdf>>, accessed 14 August 2023
- Hassan, M. and Kodouda, A., 'Sudan's uprising: The fall of a dictator', *Journal of Democracy*, 30/4 (2019), pp. 89–103, <<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/sudans-uprising-the-fall-of-a-dictator>>, accessed 14 August 2023
- Henry, J., 'They Were Shouting "Kill Them": Sudan's Violent Crackdown on Protesters in Khartoum', Human Rights Watch, 17 November 2019, <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/11/18/they-were-shouting-kill-them/sudans-violent-crackdown-protesters-khartoum>>, accessed 15 August 2023
- Khalafallah, H., Interview with Head of International IDEA's Sudan Programme, conducted by David Towriss, 8 May 2023
- Lynch, J., 'Why Sudan's protest movement has toppled one but not yet two dictators', *African Arguments*, 1 July 2022, <<https://africanarguments.org/2022/07/why-sudan-protest-movement-has-been-able-to-topple-one-but-not-two-dictators>>, accessed 22 June 2023
- Marovic, M. and Hayder, Z., *Sowing the Seeds of Nonviolent Action in Sudan* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2022), pp. 1–20, <<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/sowing-seeds-nonviolent-action-sudan>>, accessed 14 August 2023
- Radio Dabanga, 'Declaration of Freedom and Change signed in Sudan capital', 3 January 2019, <<https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/declaration-of-freedom-and-change-signed-in-sudan-capital>>, accessed 14 August 2023

Saeed, S., Interview with Head of International IDEA's Sudan Programme, conducted by David Towriss, 19 July 2023

Soliman, A. and Hassan, Y., 'Resolving Sudan's crisis means removing those fighting', Chatham House, 21 April 2023, <<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/04/resolving-sudans-crisis-means-removing-those-fighting>>, accessed 14 August 2023

Stigant, S., 'What's behind the fighting in Sudan?', United States Institute of Peace, 20 April 2023, <<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/whats-behind-fighting-sudan>>, accessed 14 August 2023

United Nations, 'Sudan: Justice for repression against anti-coup protesters key to breaking cycle of violence and political turmoil, say UN Experts' [press release], Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 25 October 2022, <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/sudan-justice-repression-against-anti-coup-protesters-key-breaking-cycle>>, accessed 14 August 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This case study was written by David Towriss, with input from Sami Saeed, Hamid Khalafallah and staff members in International IDEA's Africa and West Asia regional office.

ABOUT INTERNATIONAL IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with 34 Member States founded in 1995, with a mandate to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

What we do

We develop policy-friendly research related to elections, parliaments, constitutions, digitalization, climate change, inclusion and political representation, all under the umbrella of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. We assess the performance of democracies around the world through our unique Global State of Democracy Indices and Democracy Tracker.

We provide capacity development and expert advice to democratic actors including governments, parliaments, election officials and civil society. We develop tools and publish databases, books and primers in several languages on topics ranging from voter turnout to gender quotas.

We bring states and non-state actors together for dialogues and lesson sharing. We stand up and speak out to promote and protect democracy worldwide.

Where we work

Our headquarters is in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

Our publications and databases

We have a catalogue with more than 1,000 publications and over 25 databases on our website. Most of our publications can be downloaded free of charge.

<https://www.idea.int>

© 2023 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

International IDEA publications are independent of specific national or political interests. Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of International IDEA, its Board or its Council members.

Applications for permission to reproduce or translate all or any part of this publication should be made to International IDEA.

Design and layout: International IDEA

DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2023.64>>

ISBN: 978-91-7671-676-2 (PDF)



International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN
+46 8 698 37 00
info@idea.int
www.idea.int