



Sudan: Pressure Mounts on the Government

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Sudan's President Omar al Bashir, who took power in a 1989 coup, arguably faces the greatest challenge to his rule in three decades, as public pressure for a political transition mounts. Bashir's government has been the target of near-daily protests across the country since December 19. A common refrain among the protesters is "*Tasgut bas*" ("Just fall, that's all").

Spurred by frustrations with deteriorating economic conditions, corruption, poor governance, and repression, the protests have been further fueled by the government's response, in which more than 2,600 people reportedly have been detained and over 50 killed. The crackdown threatens efforts to improve U.S.-Sudan relations and raises broader questions for U.S. policy. Bashir's recent declaration of martial law may increase prospects for instability, with implications for U.S. interests in the region.

These demonstrations are unprecedented for Sudan in their longevity and geographic scope. In addition to street protests, organized by a network of Sudanese professionals, doctors and medical professionals have staged strikes, staff of banks and telecommunications companies have led walk-outs, and engineers have stopped construction projects. Women are prominent among the protesters, as are university students.

Opposition groups, in coordination with the Sudanese Professionals Association, have released a Declaration of Freedom and Change, calling for the immediate end of the regime and the formation of a transitional government. A group of university professors have issued a similar proposal. There appears little trust among regime critics that the government would conduct credible elections (scheduled for 2020), particularly given the Islamist ruling party's move to facilitate another term for Bashir.

While some observers draw comparisons with the Arab Spring, Sudanese cite their own history of protest movements, which resulted in changes of government in 1964 and 1985. Those uprisings were also led by professional union and political party coalitions, rather than by armed insurgents.

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The Government of Sudan's Response to the Protests

Security forces have fired tear gas into hospitals, universities, and neighborhoods; used [live ammunition](#) against demonstrators; and reportedly [targeted doctors](#) treating wounded protesters. Reporting from inside Sudan is [restricted](#), but the BBC has documented [footage of so-called “hit squads,”](#) paramilitary units reportedly coordinated by the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) to suppress the protests. The BBC reporting suggests that activists are tortured in secret detention facilities; several people have [died in detention](#).

Some contend, nevertheless, that the security response appears [somewhat restrained](#), as Sudan seeks to shake its [pariah status](#) and gain debt relief from international creditors. By comparison, security forces reportedly [killed over 170](#) people during a week of protests in 2013. Sudanese forces and state-backed militia have been previously implicated in [war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide](#).

President Bashir's February 22 declaration of a year-long, nationwide state of emergency [heightens the risk](#) that the crisis will escalate as the government moves to quell the protests. In a late night broadcast, he first struck a conciliatory tone, pledging economic reform and a new national dialogue (despite the recent arrest of several opposition leaders). He directed the legislature to pause efforts to lift presidential term limits from the constitution. Bashir then replaced the state governors with senior security officers, however, and, after dismissing most of his government, promoted Defense Minister Awad Ibn Auf, who is subject to [U.S. sanctions](#) for his reported role in Darfur atrocities, to First Vice President. [Ahmad Harun](#), also a target of sanctions and wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC), was named acting head of the ruling party.

On February 25, Bashir issued [emergency decrees](#) banning unauthorized gatherings, demonstrations, and strikes, and prohibiting the publication or circulation of news deemed as undermining the state or government officials. He also expanded authorities for searches, seizures, and arrests. Neither the decrees nor the deployment of additional troops in Khartoum have deterred protesters from returning to the streets, amid uncertainty about how strictly the new laws will be enforced. Opposition leaders have [rejected](#) Bashir's call for dialogue as insincere, and insufficient.

Figure 1. President Bashir and Newly Appointed Military Governors



Source: Government of Sudan.

U.S. Policy Issues and Outlook

The Sudanese government's heavy-handed response to the protests complicates the way forward for U.S.-Sudan relations. It also highlights [questions](#) about the U.S. policy approach toward a government seen as [authoritarian](#) and responsible for [serious human rights violations](#). Under a phased framework for reengagement launched under the Obama Administration, President Trump [lifted economic sanctions on Sudan](#) in 2017, citing [reported progress on five tracks](#).

Some sanctions remain in place, including restrictions linked to Sudan's designation as a [State Sponsor of Terrorism](#) (SST) and congressionally-imposed [restrictions on aid and debt relief](#). In November 2018, the State Department announced "Phase II" of the reengagement framework, under which the Administration would consider lifting Sudan's SST designation if relevant criteria are met and if the government makes progress on [six key areas of concern](#), including counterterrorism cooperation, humanitarian access, and respect for human rights and religious freedom.

U.S. officials have emphasized improvements in counterterrorism cooperation and praised Sudan's pledge to cut ties with North Korea, but there have been [signs of backsliding](#) on other stated priorities, including humanitarian access and an end to [offensive operations in Darfur](#). The Trump Administration drew controversy (and [an injunction](#)) for its 2017 decision to terminate Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Sudan [despite concerns raised by multiple agencies](#). A recent [report suggesting Sudan deployed child soldiers](#) to Yemen has provoked questions about the State Department's removal of Sudan from the Child Soldiers Prevention Act List. Some critics contend that the Obama and Trump Administrations have [prioritized the intelligence relationship](#) over other policy objectives, and [one former U.S. diplomat](#) argues that they have failed to articulate strategic objectives for the relationship.

The senior U.S. diplomat at the United Nations has expressed [deep concern](#) with the state of emergency and called on the government to "create an environment for an inclusive political process that would lead to sustainable peace and democracy." The new emergency laws further undermine the prospects for credible elections. The status of Phase II is in question: the State Department has [warned](#) that the response to protests will determine future engagement.

The International Crisis Group has called for Western countries to create [incentives for Bashir to step down](#) and take steps to facilitate a peaceful transition. Bashir faces [two ICC arrest warrants](#); some advocate for an ICC deferral in exchange for his resignation. The Trump Administration has not indicated its view on Bashir's political future. Some observers question whether there is [sufficient international attention](#) to calls for Bashir's retirement. Egypt and Qatar have signaled support for him; the positions of other Gulf countries are less clear. Meanwhile, food prices continue to rise and 5.8 million Sudanese face [severe food insecurity](#). The Darfur peace process remains [stalled](#), amid [concerns](#) about the drawdown of U.N. peacekeepers. The government shows no sign of shifting its spending on security, which reportedly represents [as much as 70% of its budget](#), toward addressing the economic crisis. With [no sign of a bailout](#) forthcoming, frustrations growing, and security forces poised to suppress dissent, Sudan's overlapping crises may deteriorate.

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