

Sudan: Re-defining the "Arab Spring"

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By Eric Reeves

July 15, 2012 - The National Islamic Front/National Congress Party regime in Khartoum has had plenty of opportunities over the past year and more to learn from the experiences of other repressive regimes during the ongoing "Arab Spring." In fact, "spring" seems an increasingly ironic term, given developments in Syria, Libya, and even Egypt, where the army has not really surrendered power and people have elected—as a "least bad" President—a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is the same organization that gave rise to the National Islamic Front in Sudan, now the National Congress Party. The NIF/NCP has watched carefully the events and responses of the past year, knowing full well that Sudan's own fundamental demographic is the same as that of other "Arab Spring" countries: a large and increasingly well-educated population under 30 years of age, who face an economy that is highly unlikely to generate employment commensurate with their education, or indeed employment of any sort.

Unprecedented protests in northern Sudan are now in their fourth week, and show no signs of slowing. Indeed, every Sudanese with whom I have spoken over the past few weeks has said the same thing: "This is our moment; if we do not seize it, another chance is not likely to come." The success of the uprising will depend on a number of factors, but an economy in freefall has proved the catalyst for this explosion of years of outrage, frustration, and deprivation. And while the protests began with students (especially Khartoum university students), and focused on the rapid increase in the price of fuel and other commodities, protestors now also include journalists, lawyers, businessmen, and other civilian constituencies. And as the protests spread—to Omdurman and other parts of central Khartoum, to Sennar, el-Obeid, Wad Medani, Damazin (Blue Nile University), Gedaref, Kosti, and Port Sudan—it becomes harder for the regime to pretend that they are the work of mere "agitators and bubbles," as President Omar al-Bashir would have it.

The economy

Despite the uprising, the regime refuses to consider demands to reinstate the highly popular fuel subsidy, and indeed has dug its heels in deeply. For the economic logic here is inescapable, as even the NIF/NCP recognizes; the extraordinary pressures that brought about the decision to remove subsidies are simply overwhelming, deriving from budgetary realities that simply can't be changed. The fuel subsidy alone has cost approximately \$2 billion annually, contributing substantially to a massive budget shortfall. Even without providing subsidies—the loss of which will dramatically increase costs for most Sudanese—the budget gap remains. So in addition to specific cost increases—for food, fuel, and all imported goods—the economy must confront the prospect of a terrifying overall inflation rate—a rate that now only partially anticipates the coming need for the regime to print money simply to balance the books.

There is no chance of international borrowing, except from a few wealthy Arab nations; but even these have come to see Sudan under the current regime as a financial sink-hole, and are increasingly hesitant to alienate political constituencies from which Sudan's future leadership might come (and who will inherit Sudan's massive external debt of almost \$40 billion, most of it to rich Arab countries). Borrowing, if it occurs, will no longer be nearly enough. The upshot is that inflation is rising steeply and inexorably in Sudan: it was an already alarming 28 percent in April; many economists believed that the real figure for May was over 40 percent; and the "official" rate for June (37 percent) clearly understates the level of price increases (e.g., there is no figure for transportation costs, which will rise extremely sharply with the loss of fuel subsidies). Real inflation is already over 50 percent and accelerating.

And inflation will continue to rise for the foreseeable future, bringing unsustainable pressure on an economy that precipitously lost all oil export revenues with its refusal last January to negotiate a reasonable deal over pipeline transit fees for oil from South Sudan moving north to Port Sudan. In fact, the economy is projected by the IMF to contract by over 7 percent this year, further diminishing the revenue base for the regime. Without the ability to borrow money to cover the growing budget shortfall, the regime will have no choice but to print significantly more money. This is the fastest and surest route to higher, and rapidly accelerating, inflation. The continuing steep decline in the exchange value of the Sudanese pound is a clear measure of international assessment of the currency at present. When the printing presses are fully cranked up, the value of the pound will plummet.

So while the regime has vaguely promised to cushion the blow of inflation for food purchases, there are simply no means available to halt the effects of inflation, even for food. A typical food basket that today costs what is deemed an exorbitant 30 Sudanese pounds could very soon cost 60 pounds; and any stabilizing (i.e., subsidizing) of this price at previous (real) price levels will be even more expensive and create an even greater budget gap—and more inflation. This is the engine of what economists call "hyper-inflation," and it will destroy not only the value of the Sudanese pound but the workings of the broader economy. In a powerfully telling development, lines for bread have recently been reported in Khartoum and even

surreptitiously videographed.

If hyper-inflation occurs, savings will be wiped out in a matter of weeks; banks will experience runs and soon fail; there will be no viable currency for international trade, even as there is exceedingly little in the way of foreign exchange reserves. Even domestic commercial transactions will be impossible and there will be a rapid move toward a barter economy. The desperate flight to what hard currency remains available on the black market will further exacerbate inflation.

The political ramifications of this economic implosion are many. It has already proved impossible for the regime to sustain the vast and expensive patronage network that over the years has provided critical political support; that network is now shrinking even further, eroding political support when it is most needed. Regime promises about streamlining government ministries and bureaucracies—even if carried out—are not remotely sufficient, but will certainly alienate many NIF/NCP loyalists. At the same time, the army and security services take up approximately half the budget (perhaps more); they are now being paid with an inflated currency that is increasingly worthless; large-scale desertions and defections will soon occur, particularly among soldiers recruited or conscripted from the marginalized regions (this is already occurring in the Nuba Mountains). Reports from Darfur have long suggested that Arab militia groups are unhappy about the absence of payment, in money or land. Neither is available to the regime now.

Preparations

In its study of other events of the "Arab Spring," the regime has noted well the power of social media, cellular phones, Internet communications (including email), and courageous journalism. Unsurprisingly, all have been targeted over the past weeks. The first sign that the NIF/NCP anticipated serious trouble came with the intermittent shutdown of the Internet and phone service the week of June 25, which actually helped to spark a large demonstration on June 30—the 23rd anniversary of the NIF military coup that brought the regime to power. Demonstrations of various groups numbering in the hundreds have continued to be brutally suppressed with tear gas, truncheons, and mass arrests of activists—more than 2,000 according to accounts from protesters. Many of these people have disappeared into Khartoum's notorious "ghost houses," where they can be tortured and held incommunicado indefinitely.

On Wednesday July 4, journalists also responded collectively to the censorship and outright confiscation of newspaper runs that have increased steadily since the national "elections" of 2010. Many have also been put out of business by the exorbitant fines imposed by the regime, and most recently by wildly excessive "taxes" on the supplies necessary for newspaper printing. This year Sudan again was in the bottom ten nations evaluated by Reporters Without Borders for press freedom. Nonetheless, social media—especially Twitter—are providing a steady stream of reports from the ground (see Girifna and #SudanRevolts).

A "state of emergency" has not yet been called: the outcry over such a declaration may well work to intensify the uprising. But this will not long be a major consideration for the regime. So far the protestors have used no weapons beyond burning tires, blocking streets, and hurling rocks. But there are many weapons hidden away in and around Khartoum and the other cities in which protests have occurred; and if civilian casualties begin to mount, these weapons may well make an appearance, rapidly escalating the military and political stakes. Any such armed insurrection will be, in the regime's view, justification for rapid and extremely violent counter-measures. Al-Bashir has ominously threatened to deploy the "real Mujahdeen" if the uprising grows. We will then witness a reprise of rebellion in Libya and Syria, although Sudan is vastly larger geographically than either (certainly if Libya is understood to mean the coastal regions where more than 95 percent of the people live).

Which way the Army?

A huge question looming over the current crisis is what position the army will take as protests grow. The National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) are likely to remain loyal to the end, but the army is potentially another story, especially given the evident rift between the most senior generals now exercising greatest political power in the regime, and the mid-level officer corps. The NIF/NCP ruthlessly purged the army on coming to power in 1989, and effectively destroyed it as an institution in the Egyptian mold. The army has never regained a true esprit de corps, and disaffected officers up to the rank of colonel may soon refuse to obey orders to use violence against protesting civilians.

Moreover, rebellion in areas as remote as Nubia, Port Sudan, el-Obeid, and Gedaref will be difficult to confront simultaneously, especially since the Sudan Armed Forces are taking a ferocious beating in the Nuba Mountains, and are spread thin in Darfur, Blue Nile, and the border regions with South Sudan, including areas immediately adjacent to Abyei. Morale is low among most of the front-line troops, and there is little desire to support a failing regime. Once desertions and defections begin, there will be a cascade. If the NIF/NCP loses the unified support of the army, or even the mid-level officer corps, its days are numbered.

This does not mean, however, that these days will be without great bloodshed.

Just how indiscriminate the regime can be in its violence is captured in one of scores of observations from the ground reported by Radio Dabanga:

"The security service raided the house of Al Amir Al Haj Nugdallah, a famous leader of the Umma party claiming he was hiding protesters. Despite the fact Nugdallah has been bedbound for 15 years the security forces threw tear gas into his room."

As the violence and imprisonment affect more families, many Sudanese insist that anger is rapidly overcoming fear, the true tipping point in any such uprising. In the words of the distinguished Sudanese human rights advocate Osman Hummida, head of the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, "I think the people managed to break the fear in the last few weeks and there is some sort of sustainability and gaining of momentum." One demonstrator is reported as declaring that "people no longer feared the security services, and were coming out onto the streets 'because of' rather than in spite of oppression. 'People are aware, angry and hungry now, and that's what makes a revolution happen.'" And the ranks are being filled from different and previously unexpected quarters. The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (June 22, 2012) offers a telling account from one demonstrator: "Last week, a police officer told me that, if we continue protesting, they will join us."

These are extraordinary and unprecedented challenges to the 23-year tyranny of the NIF/NCP, and notably they are not being led by the traditional sectarian political opposition. The Umma Party and Democratic Unionist Party have so far been indecisive, although the Al Ansar mosque in Omdurman (also known as the Wad Nubawi mosque and associated with the Umma party) has increasingly become a focal point for demonstrations following Friday prayers; former prime minister Sadiq el-Mahdi is also becoming more outspoken. But this is not a sectarian uprising, and it is unlikely—given the broader political forces at work in Sudan—that any political arrangement will again be dominated by Nile River valley Arab elites.

The Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF)—representing rebel groups from Darfur, Blue Nile, South Kordofan, and eastern Sudan—has already, one or another of which has ruled Sudan since independence. In the view of the SRF, there can be no political "arrangement" that excludes Sudan's marginalized people, as has been the case for over half a century. No political deal can be cut that does not include the SRF, or there will be civil war in the north.

The international response

The international response to date has been tepid at best, condemning in perfunctory fashion the grossly excessive use of force by the regime's security forces. This will encourage the regime to believe that it can prevail if it simply remains brutal enough; here the example of Syria is powerfully encouraging. Despite its indecisiveness to date, the world must recognize that as the uprising continues, and inevitably becomes more violent, international response will become increasingly important in the calculations of NIF/NCP survivalists.

So far, important international actors continue to respond to the crisis on the basis of the perverse assessments that have guided U.S. Sudan policy during the Obama administration. Special envoy Princeton Lyman laid down the principal view in an interview of with the important news source Asharq Al-Awsat:

[Asharq Al-Awsat] The U.S. administration has welcomed the Arab Spring which has overthrown a number of dictatorships in the Middle East and led to free and fair elections being held. Are you calling for the Arab Spring to encompass Sudan, as well?

[Lyman] This is not part of our agenda in Sudan. Frankly, we do not want to see the ouster of the [Sudanese] regime, nor regime change. We want to see the regime carrying out reform via constitutional democratic measures. (emphasis added)

[Asharq Al-Awsat] The SPLM has said that it wants to bring the Arab Spring to Sudan. Do you oppose this?

[Lyman] We want to see freedom and democracy [in Sudan], but not necessarily via the Arab Spring. (March 2011)

It would appear not to matter to Lyman that the overwhelming majority of Sudanese have long wanted regime change, and are now explicit in expressing this goal. Their seriousness can be measured by the increasing willingness to risk their lives and livelihoods to achieve such change. Again, this is not simply students and those who made up the founding non-violent group for change known as Girifna ("we are fed up!"). The uprising is a broad-based and popularly supported force pushing for democratization and a truly plural Sudan. In short, they are serious about the very ideals the U.S. and the European Union declare that they support abroad.

But the expedient and disingenuous declaration that the U.S. wants "to see the regime carry out reform via constitutional democratic measures" suggests just how morally bankrupt the Obama administration's Sudan policy has become, and how little leadership it is prepared to offer. Certainly there is not a shred of historical evidence that the NIF/NCP has the slightest interest in "reform via constitutional measures"—and Lyman and the Obama administration know this full well. No doubt Lyman felt that questions about an "Arab Spring" in Sudan were entirely hypothetical in March 2011, and that he could dodge the questions with another expedient and disingenuous answer. Events have proved otherwise.

The "Arab Spring" has begun in Sudan; equivocation, neutrality, and expediency are simply no longer useful policy options. This is true for the Obama administration and just as true for other important international actors, including the EU, UN, as well as the African Union and the Arab League. None appears to be responding seriously. What is certain is that "neutrality" in present circumstances offers tacit support to the regime; as such, it is a form of moral and diplomatic cowardice and bad

faith.

Present realities cannot be ignored; the regime is showing its true colors in moving to crush genuine democratic forces. The world cannot stand at a safe diplomatic distance, hiding behind absurd claims about the democratic capabilities of the NIF/NCP regime or doubts about the "legitimacy" of the aspirations of those now rebelling against decades of tyranny.

Support for those working for democracy and freedom in Sudan must be urgent, unambiguous, and tough-minded. Condemnation of and response to the regime's brutality must be vigorous and consistent. And this response must finally address all the immensely destructive atrocity crimes that the regime continues to perpetrate—in the Nuba Mountains, in Blue Nile, in Darfur, and in the form of relentless aerial attacks on civilians in north and South Sudan.

There can be little doubt that this is the moment of truth for both Sudan and for the international community. Libya and Syria offer telling examples of what happens when the world underestimates the ruthlessness of tyrants who will use any degree of force and violence to sustain themselves in power. The "Arab Spring" in Sudan offers a moment in which we may assess whether the world has learned anything about the costs of accommodating such tyranny.

Follow-up note: as of July 15 (1:00pmEDT), there had been no announced breakthrough in the meetings between regime president al-Bashir and Salva Kiir, President of the Government of South Sudan. These meetings are likely the last chance to negotiate a settlement of oil revenue issues, the short-term key to the economies of both countries.

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