

REPORT

In Sudan, a Transition to Democracy or a Military Power Play?

Omar al-Bashir's three-decade rule is over, but demonstrators reject the army's plan.

BY **ROBBIE GRAMER, JUSTIN LYNCH, COLUM LYNCH, JEF COATE O'DONNELL** | APRIL 11, 2019, 2:06 PM

Army officers in Sudan ousted President Omar al-Bashir on Thursday after months of street protests, but demonstrators quickly rejected a transition plan that called for a transitional body to hold power for the next two years.

Defense Minister Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf, surrounded by Sudanese flags, announced on state television that Bashir's 30-year rule was over. The 75-year-old dictator, who has been under indictment by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for genocide since 2009, was placed on house arrest. His supporters were unable to flee the country due to a 24-hour airspace shutdown.

On the streets of Khartoum, elated Sudanese protesters ripped down posters bearing their former leader's image. But it remained uncertain whether April 11 would mark the beginning of democracy in Sudan or the transition from one dictatorship to another—or something worse.

Ibn Auf said a transitional council would lead the country for two years but did not offer details. The defense minister is himself under U.S. sanctions for his role in the Sudanese government's genocide in Darfur.

"This is a recycled coup which will not be welcomed at all," said Sara Abdelgalil, a spokeswoman for the Sudanese Professionals Association. She said Ibn Auf's statement was "far from the expectations of the people of Sudan ... which is the handover of power peacefully from the regime, unconditionally, and a civil transitional government."

Amgad Fareid Eltayeb, a Sudanese political activist, described the event as a "decorative coup."

“The Sudanese people didn’t take the streets for four months to replace a tyrant with another,” he told [Foreign Policy](#).

The Sudanese Professionals Association has been the driving force behind the protests. The group began coordinating marches in December over the price of bread and living conditions. Protests quickly spread across the country and grew to numbers Sudan had never seen under Bashir’s rule.

“In the past, democratic experiments were led by [Sudan’s] traditional political parties,” said Khalid Medani, a professor on African politics and Islam at McGill University. “This new mobilization is led by lawyers, doctors, and engineers and, of course, women’s organizations.”

Members of the association and other activists told [FP](#) that they refrained from calling on the army to join the protests until they peaked this past weekend.

“What the bargain seems to have been is to avert a civil war, for now,” said Alex De Waal, the executive director of the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University.

The United States considers Sudan a state sponsor of terrorism and has placed economic sanctions on the country but also maintains a security relationship that involves cooperation on intelligence and counterterrorism.

It remained unclear whether Ibn Auf’s announcement of a transitional government would placate those military forces that sided with the protestors.

“There is not much leadership by the existing opposition parties, so there is not a clear political figure or party that is likely to step in in this moment to take power,” said Zachariah Mampilly, a scholar on protest movements and African politics at Vassar College. “That is why the military has been able to monopolize the space so far.”

Judd Devermont, a former senior CIA Africa analyst now with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, pointed to the example in Algeria, where longtime President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was ousted this month. “We have seen in Algeria that the protestors will demand a voice in shaping the transition, and right now the terms [for Sudanese] are not acceptable,” he said.

One question in the aftermath of the coup is whether Sudan’s new leaders will deliver Bashir to the ICC.

For more than 15 years, international lawyers, backed by a mandate from the world’s

largest powers, have failed to hold Bashir to account for a legacy of mass atrocities in Darfur. Government-backed militias carried out an alleged campaign of ethnic cleansing in the western region of Sudan in 2003 and 2004.

Women have **recounted** being kidnapped by Bashir's soldiers and taken as sex slaves. More than 300,000 people were killed and 2 million **displaced** in the conflict that has defined Bashir's legacy in Sudan.

Bashir's ouster "is extraordinary news," Zeid Raad al-Hussein, the former U.N. high commissioner for human rights, told **FP**. "I'm hoping the military will now do the right thing and hand him over to The Hague. If they want a new future for Sudan, they are going to have to make the break with Bashir and hand him over to the custody of the ICC."

Zeid said that while he thinks it is more likely that Bashir will be sent to a neighboring country to live out his final days, his downfall provides the military government with an opportunity to mend its relations with key Western powers.

The U.N. Security Council first voted to initiate an investigation into Bashir by the ICC prosecutor in 2005. The ICC indicted him in 2009 and 2010 on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.

Sudan, which is not a party to the Rome Statute that established the court, refused to surrender Bashir. He repeatedly defied the court's arrest warrant by traveling around the world with impunity, symbolizing the court's fecklessness.

"The suffering of the people of Darfur is overwhelming," recalled U.S. Ambassador Tony Hall during a 2004 trip to Darfur, according to his cable **released** by WikiLeaks. "I listened to stories of women raped, men beaten, tortured, and murdered, villages burned, and saw people barely hanging on to life."

But more than a decade later, the United States pushed to repair ties with Sudan in an effort that spanned Barack Obama's and Donald Trump's administrations. U.S. diplomats have quietly eased sanctions and international isolation in exchange for concessions from Bashir on counterterrorism cooperation, increased access to humanitarian aid, and other issues. The CIA championed the approach, as Bashir rebranded himself as an ally in the fight against terrorist groups.

For months, senior Trump administration officials have discussed lifting Sudan's label as a state sponsor of terrorism in exchange for more concessions on issues including human rights.

Among the most influential figures charting Sudan's future is the country's intelligence chief, Salah Gosh. He has a history of collaborating with the CIA on counterterrorism efforts and was installed in his position with the backing of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Both countries poured hundreds of millions of dollars into propping up Bashir's regime and the Sudanese economy as Gulf states vie for influence on the Horn of Africa.

Richard Dicker, the director of Human Rights Watch's international justice program, said the fall of Bashir revived the possibility that he may finally face justice in The Hague.

"Bashir and others of that ilk hid behind the argument that sitting heads of state cannot be prosecuted, even for the most serious crimes," he said. "Well, the people of Sudan have removed that argument."

Robbie Gramer is a diplomacy and national security reporter at [Foreign Policy](#). Twitter: [@RobbieGramer](#)

Justin Lynch is a journalist covering Eastern Europe, Africa, and cybersecurity. Twitter: [@just1nlynch](#)

Colum Lynch is a senior staff writer at [Foreign Policy](#). Twitter: [@columlynch](#)

Jefcoate O'Donnell is an editorial fellow at [Foreign Policy](#). Twitter: [@brjodonnell](#)

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