

Social tensions worsen as south of Sudan votes for secession

Ann Talbot
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More than 100 people have been arrested this week after student protests at universities in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. One demonstrator, Mohammed Abdulrahman, a student at Ahliya University, died on Sunday after being beaten by the police.

Fresh protests broke out in Jackson Square in Khartoum, in the Al-Kalakla district of south Khartoum and at Al-Nilein University on Tuesday and at Sennar, a town 300 kilometres southeast of Khartoum on Thursday. Other protests have been reported in the towns of El Obeid and Kosti, as well as in Gezira state.

The protests were organised on social networking sites by three previously unknown groups, “Spark”, “Youth for Change” and “We Are Fed Up”. The organisers claim that they have no association with existing opposition groups they say have failed to offer a credible response to the policies of the government of President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, who came to power in a coup in 1989.

A statement on the “Youth for Change” Facebook page said, “Our brothers in Tunisia did it and so did our brothers in Egypt. It is about time for us.”

The organisers said, “We would like to be clear that this is a call for removal of this government.”

Their protest was in response to “the high cost of living, corruption, nepotism, unemployment and all practices of the ruling power”.

The response of the regime was swift and ruthless. The universities were closed for two weeks. Armed groups are said to be patrolling the campuses, beating up students. Security personnel in plainclothes are reported to be bundling oppositionists into unmarked cars. Some of those released from detention have described being tortured with electric shocks.

The government clampdown has made it difficult for the media to report the protests. A cameraman for the AFP news agency was among 10 journalists arrested on Sunday, as they attempted to cover the protests. It is thought that a total of 16 journalists have been arrested. Some are from the paper *Al-Maydan*, which is affiliated to the Sudanese Communist Party. Copies of *Al-Maydan* were confiscated, as well as the papers *Al-Sahafah* and *Ajrass al-Hurriyah*.

Al-Bashir’s two decades of rule has been destabilised by the

same global processes that have produced the protests in Egypt and other North African and Middle Eastern countries. The ruling elite have enriched themselves in a grotesque fashion in recent years, widening the gulf between rich and poor to an unsustainable level. Sudan’s oil revenue has gone directly into the pockets of the clique around Bashir and, since the peace deal with the south the leaders of the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) have taken their share too. Rising global prices have now brought social tensions to breaking point.

The US-sponsored secession of the southern part of the country has impacted seriously on the economic situation of Sudan. More than 90 percent of the voters opted for a breakaway in the recent referendum. A new state will be formed in July.

Most of Sudan’s oil fields are in the territory of what will become Southern Sudan. Half of the Khartoum government’s revenue comes from oil, which will shortly belong to another country. Khartoum has been forced to devalue the Sudanese pound and has introduced an austerity package. State-owned enterprises will be privatized, subsidies on sugar and petroleum products have been cut, and imports reduced. It is this austerity programme that has triggered the recent protests.

Sudan’s economic problems have sent the Khartoum government cap in hand to Washington. Minister of Foreign Affairs Ali Karti met with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to discuss the lifting of sanctions and the removal of Sudan from the list of “terrorist states”. Deputy Secretary of State James B. Steinberg and US President Special Envoy to Sudan Scott Gration were in Khartoum this week to set out a roadmap to improve bilateral relations between the two countries, which will include the question of peace talks in Darfur and the secession of the south.

“We see no reason for keeping Sudan in the list of state sponsors of terrorism or maintaining the economic sanctions,” said Salah Gosh, advisor to al-Bashir.

Gosh is the former head of national security in Sudan. Despite the public friction between Khartoum and Washington he has worked closely with the CIA, the FBI and the US Defense Department over many years. He assisted the US in spying on the Iraqi insurgency and Sudanese intelligence serves as the eyes and ears of the CIA in Somalia. After the meeting

with the US officials, he told reporters that he did not regard regime change as an immediate threat.

Gosh recognises that the US and al-Bashir's government have a common interest in maintaining tight political control of the region and preventing any challenge from below. He calculates that the uprising that is spreading across the Middle East and North Africa gives Khartoum a strong bargaining position.

He claimed that the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), the Popular Congress Party (PCP), the National Umma Party (NUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) were all plotting to bring down al-Bashir's government through a mass uprising. In reality, these official opposition parties cannot agree on a strategy and many of them are likely to be incorporated into the new northern government that is formed after the secession of the south in July. They will then find themselves helping to impose the government's austerity measures on a population that is already exhibiting the first signs of dissent.

The developing popular movement in Sudan has taken the official opposition as much by surprise as it has the Obama administration. The new US-backed state in the south may not be immune from the uprising that is spreading across the region. The referendum and secession are still being presented as a success for US foreign policy, but the emerging protests may cut across its plans.

Howard Berman, ranking Democratic member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, praised Obama's approach to Sudan. With the successful conclusion of the referendum he said, "We can see the results of President Obama's hard work" and "hard-nosed US diplomacy".

This self-congratulatory prose glosses over the appalling conditions in South Sudan, an area the size of France with only 100 kilometres of paved roads, half of which are in Chinese-run oil fields. Large parts of this still unmapped territory can only be reached by helicopter. Illiteracy is widespread, even among the civil servants who hope to run the new state. It is thought that only 500 girls a year finish their primary education.

Elijah Malok Aleng, the deputy governor of the Central Bank of Sudan, gave a sombre warning. "I am afraid the state is collapsing before it even begins," he said, "... a few of you will control the economy. You will be tycoons. We already know of people who have millions in their accounts... What is happening in Tunisia, Cairo can easily come here."

While it offers little but poverty to its own people, the new state is a magnet for foreign investors. As the *Economist* pointed out, "Large parts of South Sudan are invitingly fertile. Farmers could grow grain, sugar cane, coffee, tea and tropical fruits for canning."

There are extensive proven reserves of gold, copper and iron ore, in addition to the 6.7 billion barrels of oil that are known to exist. More are suspected.

US companies are still excluded by the sanctions imposed on

the Khartoum regime. But once the south secedes, they will be able to take advantage of these lucrative prospects. At present China dominates the southern oilfields and imports 50 to 60 percent of Sudan's oil. When the new state is created, all previous contracts will be up for renegotiation and US companies will be able to make a grab for Sudan's resources. China has formally welcomed the secession vote, but it will not welcome US competition.

In addition, the German steel company Thyssen-Krupp plans to build a railway from Juba, the southern capital, to Gulu in northern Uganda. Its Gleistechnik subsidiary is involved in a consortium with the American company, Ayr Logistics, and the Russian company, MosMetrostroy. This route may provide an alternative outlet for the southern oilfields. Southern Sudan will be a completely landlocked country and all its oil currently heads north to Port Sudan on the Red Sea.

Until another pipeline is built, Khartoum retains its monopoly. This is no doubt a factor in Gosh's complacency. But rather than being a reason for Washington to develop more friendly relations with Khartoum, it will inevitably become the basis for a conflict between north and south. WikiLeaks cables show that the US has been arming the SPLA with tanks and other heavy equipment that would enable it to act as a US proxy in the region.

Armed conflicts have already broken out. Several days of fighting in the town of Malakal in Upper Nile state resulted in 20 deaths. Two of the dead were children. At least 24 people have been wounded. The clash began when northern militiamen were told to hand over their heavy weapons to the southern forces. The northern militia are moving their heavy weapons back across what will become the border. The two sides are drawing up the battle lines of a new civil war.



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