

Protests in Sudan against austerity

Jean Shaoul
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Hundreds of university students have taken to the streets of Sudan's capital, Khartoum, for seven consecutive days to protests soaring inflation, corruption and the austerity programme of the National Congress Party (NCP).

On Friday, the protests after Friday prayers spread beyond student activists in Khartoum and to Al-Obayid in north Kordofan State and other towns. Some protesters were calling for the downfall of President Omar Hassan Al-Bashir's regime, which is backed by the army and Islamists and has been in power for 23 years.

Angry clashes broke out between demonstrators and the police. The government ordered a fierce crackdown to stop the protests spreading. Security forces blocked off the roads around the University of Khartoum, attacking students with clubs and batons, and broke up demonstrations around the universities of Khartoum in the downtown area and Omdurman with teargas.

They arrested more than 25 students on Friday and 79 in protests in the Bahari district of Khartoum the previous day. The security forces also arrested more than 40 members of opposition groups, meeting under the auspices of the Haq movement. They also targeted journalists, detaining for some hours two journalists working for Agence France-Presse and Bloomberg, and a British citizen who was taking photographs and talking to students.

The demonstrations are the first significant protests since February last year, which Bashir crushed, although there have been numerous neighbourhood protests over soaring food prices, water and electricity shutoffs, and cutbacks in public services, coupled with demonstrations against the Nile damming project in the far north.

This latest unrest broke out after the government announced plans to phase out fuel subsidies, slash jobs in the civil service—the main source of jobs for

graduates—and increase taxes on consumer goods, banks and imports. The aim is to reduce the \$2.4 billion government deficit, 3.6 percent of Sudan's GDP, that is set to rise to an estimated \$4 billion next year.

With the removal of subsidies, the price of petrol will rise by more than a third. The tax on imports is set to rise from 10 to 13 percent, value added tax from 15 to 17 percent, while the tax on banking profits will increase from 15 to 30 percent. This comes on top of a 35 percent hike in public transport fares. It will vastly increase the cost of living. In May, the cost of living rose by 30 percent, up from 28 percent in April.

Sudan's opposition parties, the Umma party, Hassan Al-Turabi's Popular Congress Party, and the Communist Party, are thoroughly discredited and no less venal than the NCP. They have rejected the austerity programme and are seeking to form a joint campaign to topple the regime and draft a new constitution.

That the ruling elite responded with such ferocity to these small demonstrations testifies to the depth of the economic and political crisis.

Sudan's ruling clique rests upon a narrow economic and social base. Sudan's economy, which had seen the highest growth rates in Africa following the discovery of oil in the south of the country, is now reeling after the secession in July 2011 of South Sudan where most of the oil is located. Oil revenues crashed from \$6.2 billion in 2010 to \$1.5 billion in 2011 and will fall to almost zero this year.

The massive oil revenues from the oilfields, the pipelines, the refineries and Port Sudan brought little relief to the grinding poverty of most of the Sudanese population, while enriching a corrupt layer. Indeed, they served to accentuate the already deeply uneven development of the country, which is largely centred on Khartoum—though not Khartoum North, Omdurman

and the poverty stricken “black belt” surrounding the capital—and the vast military-industrial complex of GIAD, Sudan’s largest single employer, which is 25 miles south of Khartoum.

The southern states of the vast country, including South Sudan, reaped little benefit. They remain to this day largely without roads and other services. In Khartoum itself, half-finished high-rise buildings in the city centre testify to the gutting of the economy.

Last month, Sudan allowed currency dealers to trade dollars at almost double the previous exchange, in effect devaluing the currency, a move that will vastly increase the rate of inflation because Sudan imports so much to meet its basic needs. Some of the most elementary commodities are now out of reach for many.

In January, South Sudan shut down all its 350,000 barrels a day oil production, which used to flow through Sudan pipeline to Port Sudan. This deprived Khartoum of its sole remaining lifeline, after a bitter dispute over the fees—set at \$32 per barrel—to use its pipeline and accusations that Sudan had stolen \$815 million worth of its crude oil.

In April, after months of skirmishes, the two countries were on the brink of all-out war as South Sudan took over and destroyed the Heglig oilfield in the disputed Abyei state. Earlier this month, talks to establish a de-militarised zone and resolve the conflict over the boundaries of the two states and the sharing of oil revenues broke down.

In addition, Sudan has been fighting rebel movements in Darfur for the last nine years, and more recently in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, and accuses South Sudan of supporting the insurgents.

The conflict has been fueled by commercial and political rivalries between the United States and the European powers, on the one hand, and China, with the Western powers backing South Sudan as a means of breaking China’s domination over the oil-rich country. At the same time, the whipping up of ethnic and nationalist tensions within the country and with South Sudan serves a vital political purpose for the Sudanese ruling clique. Under conditions of social breakdown, blaming South Sudan serves as a convenient diversion from the devastating austerity measures being implemented against the Sudanese workers and rural

poor.

Washington has long sought the downfall of the regime as a means of reducing China’s hold on the region. Sudan faces stiff US sanctions, imposed in the mid-1990s following allegations by Washington that Khartoum was aiding international terrorism. Despite a warming of US-Sudan relations and Sudan’s cooperation with the US “war on terror”, the Obama administration has still not lifted sanctions after earlier indications that it would do so.

Washington instigated Bashir’s indictment by the International Court (ICC) in 2009 on charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide in relation to the civil war in Darfur. The US is now demanding that he be arrested and sent to the Netherlands for trial. It is seeking to use the desperate humanitarian crisis in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, where insurgents close to South Sudan have refused to lay down their arms, to demand that Khartoum lift its ban of the delivery of aid to the war-torn region. It included the conflict in a recent UN resolution calling for a negotiated settlement between the two countries. This could provide the opening for a military intervention by a US-led coalition or its proxies in the region.

Washington issued a cynical statement, expressing its “deep concern” over Sudan’s crackdown on the demonstrations, and urging Khartoum “to respect the right of its citizens to freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly in order to raise their grievances.”



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