

Sudan's anti-government protests enter sixth week

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Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese workers and peasants have staged nationwide protests since December 19 that are the biggest threat to the rule of President Omar al-Bashir since he came to power in a 1989 coup.

They were initially called in opposition to the tripling of the price of bread and fuel shortages in the northeastern city of Atbara, where protesters torched the ruling National Congress Party's offices. They spread rapidly across Sudan's impoverished rural areas and then to the major towns and cities, including the Riverain region—reputedly the Islamist regime's stronghold—and the capital Khartoum, with demonstrators torching the party's offices in Dongola.

Within 24 hours, the demonstrations escalated into a generalized expression of opposition to years of austerity, economic hardship and suppression of basic democratic rights that make life intolerable for most people, particularly the youth.

Following the US-orchestrated secession of South Sudan in 2011, the country lost 80 percent of its oil-based revenues. By the start of 2018, Sudan was all but bankrupt, with petrol and diesel only available on the black market. People could not withdraw cash from the banks or ATMs, and by the summer, there were hours-long queues for bread across the country.

There has hardly been a day without spontaneous demonstrations somewhere in the country, with 15 out of Sudan's 18 states joining the protests by mid-January. The main independent professional unions have organised regular strikes and marches on the presidential palace and parliament, demanding Bashir's resignation.

The protests continued even after the government promised not to cut bread subsidies, making it all but impossible for Bashir to tour the country in an attempt to quell rising tensions with people holding banners using the slogans and appeals of the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and other states, "The people want the fall of the

regime."

Bashir has sought to lay the blame for the country's desperate economic plight on the US, claiming that the demonstrations were the product of meddling by external agents, Darfuri rebels or Israel.

On Sunday, demonstrators held sit-ins in several squares in the capital, Khartoum, and its twin city, Omdurman, in response to a call by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), an umbrella association of doctors, engineers and teachers. The authorities deployed masses of riot police and security agents, who filled the squares with muddy water and fired tear gas forcing the rallies to move to residential areas.

On Thursday, there were protests in 40 areas of the country, making it the largest day of action since the protests began. Angry clashes erupted outside the home of Mahjoub al-Taj Mahjoub, a medical student who was one of three medical personnel killed that day. The Sudanese Doctors' Committee said that Mahjoub died after being "beaten and tortured" in police custody.

There were similar protests outside Sharifa Ahmed's home, following the killing of her 25-year-old son, Dr. Babikir Abdul Hamid, by live fire while giving medical assistance to injured protesters in the Burri neighbourhood of Khartoum.

Within days of the protests starting, the government imposed curfews and states of emergencies in several cities and deployed the army and the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) in a brutal crackdown on protesters, opposition leaders, activists and journalists. The security forces have used live fire and tear gas, killing at least 51 people, according to opposition groups. According to the African Centre for Peace and Justice Studies, some of those killed died in custody after torture or ill-treatment.

Early in January, the government admitted detaining at least 800 people, including protesters, journalists, doctors,

lawyers and opposition party leaders, with the security forces storming nearby homes in pursuit of sheltered protestors. The number is widely assumed to be far higher, with many of those arrested in incommunicado detention, without access to family or lawyer visits.

The government has blocked internet access and social media networks and censored the media, demanding that the newspapers submit their articles for review before printing.

The security forces have targeted young people, subjecting them to violent beatings. *Middle East Eye* quoted 19-year-old Abul Wahab Ahmed, one of those held by security forces after a protest in southern Khartoum, who explained, “They beat me and many other protestors and then they shaved my head in a really humiliating and barbaric way. They released me after two hours of detention in their vehicles, dropping me off in the main streets of al-Kalakla where I live.”

Bahram Abdul Moniem, a journalist who has been arrested twice since the start of the protests, told *Middle East Eye*, “I and other journalists were arrested together and beaten together by the security agents. I saw hundreds of young protestors being violently beaten by the security agents.”

There are reports of the security forces arresting and beating female activists, cutting their hair and scattering their braids in the streets of the Burri neighbourhood of Khartoum to humiliate, intimidate and discourage them from joining the protests.

Anwar Alhaj, the chair of the human rights group Sudan Democracy First Group, has called for an independent investigation into the deaths of protestors, following the government’s announcement of its own investigation.

Bashir’s coalition is beginning to break ranks. On Friday, the Umma Federal Party (UFP), led by Ahmed Babikir Nahar, withdrew from the National Consensus Government and called on Bashir to step down, the third main political party to do so. Speaking at a press conference Friday, Nahar said that the party’s representatives in the government would resign immediately—although some members of the UFP reportedly rejected his announcement.

Ghazi Salah Ad-Din, the leader of the Reform Now Party and a former ally and adviser of the president, has reportedly led 22 parties away from Bashir’s coalition government.

Sadig al-Mahdi, an opposition leader and former prime minister, has backed the protests and called for his National Umma Party’s supporters to join the protests,

saying he wanted to form a transitional government to replace Bashir. He said he had signed an agreement with the Sudanese Professionals Association. Mahdi had returned to Sudan after a year in exile on the day the protests started.

Bashir can count on the support of the region’s dictators, all of whom hate each other but fear even more their own working class and poor peasants and the threat they pose to their own shaky regimes.

The US and the European Union have long opposed Bashir, to the extent of backing his indictment at the International Criminal Court for war crimes, including genocide in Darfur, and are not openly backing him. However, the last thing they want is instability in Sudan, strategically located in the Horn of Africa, alongside the Red Sea and the entrance to the Suez Canal through which much of the region’s oil passes, and a new wave of refugees heading for Europe.

Last week, Washington, in the first public statement since the start of the protests, called on Sudan to release activists still in detention and to allow peaceful expression, politely cautioning that better relations with the US were in jeopardy.

Bashir went to Qatar and Egypt to elicit practical help. Egypt’s military dictator President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi voiced his support, while Qatar reportedly offered “all that was necessary to help Sudan overcome this ordeal.”

Qatar and the Gulf States, which have been an important source of funding for Sudan since the secession of South Sudan, as well as Turkey, Russia, China and the United Arab Emirates, have been competing for influence in the Horn of Africa. While the UAE offered unspecified help, Russia and Turkey pledged fuel, wheat and other aid, with Russian private contractors training Sudan’s security forces.



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