

Protests against Sudan's al-Bashir regime enter fourth month

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On Monday, Sudan's capital, Khartoum, saw journalists protesting to demand press freedom.

Since a wave of opposition demonstrations began on December 19, the government has routinely blocked Internet access and social media networks and censored the media. It has demanded that the newspapers submit their articles for review before printing, seized rolls of newspaper and banned foreign journalists from reporting on the protests.

Some newspapers, including *Al-Maidan*, *Akhbar al-Watan* and *Al-Baath* have been off the streets for more than 70 days since January. According to the Sudanese Journalists' Network, which organised the protest, some 90 journalists critical of the government have been arrested. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) says the number of arrests is unprecedented.

On February 22, the authorities arrested Othman Mirghani, editor-in-chief of the independent newspaper *al-Tayar*, shortly after he gave a televised interview criticising President Omar al-Bashir's declaration of a state of emergency. He remains in custody without being charged.

The protests take place amidst the most sustained challenge to al-Bashir's rule since he seized power in a 1989 coup. Triggered by a government decision that tripled the price of bread, the protests quickly developed into anti-government demonstrations across the country calling for al-Bashir to step down. They have drawn in ever-broader sections of the population, with nationwide strikes of workers on March 5 and 13.

Sit-ins have taken place at universities and schools, and there have been strikes by public and private sector workers, including those at Port Sudan on the Red Sea, the main gateway for Sudan's imports and exports, who are demanding its sale to a Philippine company based in Dubai be halted. There have also been work

stoppages and protests at major telecom providers and other corporations.

Al-Bashir has responded with brutal measures aimed at crushing all resistance, including the use of live ammunition by snipers, tear gas and baton charges. Officials say 31 people have died in protest-related violence since December, but Human Rights Watch has put the death toll at 57, including children and medics, some of whom have died in prison as a result of torture.

There have been numerous arrests including that of Mariam Sadiq al-Mahdi, deputy leader of the main opposition Umma Party (and daughter of the prime minister whom al-Bashir ousted in 1989) and 15 others while demonstrating in front of Umma's headquarters in Omdurman, Sudan's second largest city.

On February 22, al-Bashir announced a year-long state of emergency—the first in 20 years—and dismissed his cabinet and all 18 provincial governments, replacing the governors with military and security officers. The newly reshuffled government under Mohamed Tahir Eila is the third to be formed in less than two years.

The state of emergency grants the authorities unprecedented powers to ban protests, public meetings and political activities, and gives the police and security forces more power to arbitrarily detain people indefinitely, search buildings and seize property. While Sudan's parliament has approved the decree for six months, not a year, it can be extended at any time.

Special emergency courts, set up to prosecute people for taking part in demonstrations, imposed harsh sentences against more than 800 protesters—some given jail terms of up to five years as well as fines—in the space of a week. Three weeks ago, the courts sentenced nine women protesters to 20 lashes each—since overturned—one day after al-Bashir issued a presidential

decree ordering the release of 150 women protesters from prison to mark International Women's Day.

On March 27, an emergency court in Omdurman sentenced three protesters, including two female university students, to six months in prison for taking part in an anti-government rally in the city.

None of this repression has deterred the demonstrations and strikes. Rallies have taken place over unemployment, soaring inflation, and controls on accessing foreign currency and cash that are making living conditions intolerable. Above all, they are aimed at al-Bashir's regime.

The government insists that the problems are economic and stem from 20 years of US sanctions and the secession in 2011 of oil-rich South Sudan. It is desperately seeking loans from Abu Dhabi, other international investment, an end to black-market foreign exchange transactions and a deal with South Sudan that will restart the latter's oil production and its transit to overseas markets through Sudan.

To dampen down opposition, al-Bashir has resigned as head of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP), appointing his close associate Ahmad Harun as its deputy head. Harun has announced a national dialogue in a bid to win over some elements of the opposition and maintain NCP rule via stage-managed elections in which Harun or Bashir would run and thereby forestall any attempt by sections of the armed forces, in the name of "the people," to oust them.

The powerful movement of the Sudanese working class is part of a growing wave of strikes and demonstrations by workers across North Africa, including in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, as well as around the world.

Sudan's opposition rallies have been led by an umbrella group, the Alliance for Freedom and Change, that includes the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA), the National Consensus Forces (NCF), Sudan Call, the Unionist Gathering and the Umma Party, with the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) playing a crucial role.

According to the secretary of the SCP's information bureau, Dr Fathi Elfad, who is one of at least 40 senior party leaders who have been arrested, the SCP has sought to "build the broadest possible alliance of political parties, armed groups, mass democratic organisations, professional unions, workers' and

peasants' movements, as well as students' and women's unions."

They are all demanding constitutional change and for al-Bashir to go. But this would serve to give the regime, which has suppressed all opposition to its policies over the last 30 years and waged war against its own people in Darfur and South Sudan, what amounts to a political facelift.

Masses of workers and youth have come out onto the streets, not for this political reshuffle, but to fundamentally transform an intolerable social order.

At least 80 percent of the Sudanese population live on less than US\$1 per day. Some 5.5 million of the country's 40 million population needed humanitarian assistance in 2018, an increase of 700,000 on 2017. Around 2.47 million children suffer from acute malnutrition.

In 2018, there were an estimated 1.2 million refugees and asylum seekers living in Sudan, including nearly 500,000 South Sudanese refugees who fled the civil war that erupted in 2013, as well as nearly 2 million internally displaced persons following Sudan's decades of internal conflicts and droughts.

The critical question is the development of an independent political strategy and the formation of a new revolutionary leadership. It means forming popular organs of power, based on the working class, to fight to overthrow and replace the al-Bashir regime with a workers' government. Above all, this depends upon extending the struggle beyond Sudan, uniting Sudanese workers with their class brothers and sisters throughout the Middle East and in the advanced capitalist countries under the leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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