



[How Sudan's Pro-Democracy Uprising Challenges Prevailing Myths about Civil Resistance](#)

A powerful pro-democracy civil insurrection in Sudan which has ousted a longstanding dictator and his successor is still in progress, but Sudanese are hopeful for a full democratic transition.

Demonstrations began in December of last year, initially focusing on the deteriorating economic situation, but soon escalated to demand that the authoritarian President Omar al-Bashir—who had ruled the country for nearly three decades—step down and that democracy be restored. By January, the protests had spread to the capital of Khartoum, gaining support from youth and women's movements as well as a number of opposition parties. During the third week in February, the government declared a state of emergency, increasing their arrests of oppositionists and censorship of media coverage of the movement. Despite the growing repression, as well as a cabinet shakeup and other measures to appease the opposition, protests continued.

On April 6, the [Association of Sudanese Professionals](#) led a march of hundreds of thousands onto the Army headquarters in Khartoum and began a sit-in, [demanding the resignation of al-Bashir](#) and the return of democratic civilian governance. Despite scores of protesters being killed over the previous months, the movement was clearly growing. Less than a week later, on April 11, the military removed al-Bashir from office and subsequently placed him under arrest. General Awad Ibn Auf, who had served as al-Bashir's Defense Minister and now headed the transitional military council in Sudan, declared himself interim president, announced the release of some political prisoners, declared a state of emergency (including a dusk to dawn curfew), and promised elections in two years.

The protesters, rejecting continued military rule and such a long delay in democratic elections, defied the curfew and demanded an immediate transition to civilian rule and early elections. Less than 30 hours later, Ibn Auf resigned and was succeeded by Lieutenant-General Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman Burhan, who—unlike Ibn Auf—was neither implicated in war crimes nor was as closely associated with al-Bashir's repressive rule. The curfew was lifted, additional political prisoners were freed, and some of the more notorious military, police, and intelligence leaders, as well as leading prosecutors, were dismissed. A half-hearted attempt by the army on April 15 to disperse the ongoing sit-in failed. Talks between pro-democracy leaders and the interim government are continuing, with a number of important concessions regarding banning members of al-Bashir's party and the

inclusion of pro-democracy leaders in the interim government, though many of the details as of this writing are still being negotiated and demands for a civilian-led transitional government remain.

Poster on the website of the Association of Sudanese Professionals' website.

A Brief History of Civil Resistance in Sudan

This is not the first time that the people of Sudan have risen up in a largely nonviolent pro-democracy insurrection against a dictatorial regime. In 1964, when the country was ruled by military dictator Ibrahim Abboud, large protests coalesced into a crippling general strike that forced him from power. A series of unstable civilian coalitions governed the country until a military coup in 1969 led by Jafaar Nimeiry, but his repressive rule was ended during the spring of 1985, when two weeks of largely nonviolent demonstrations and a general strike led to his ouster by the military. Protests continued until the military agreed to hand power over to an interim civilian government and allow for democratic elections.



Divisions within Sudan’s broad-based coalition government made it vulnerable to pressures from the military leaders and right-wing Islamists who, led by al-Bashir, seized power in 1989. In subsequent years, the regime decimated Sudanese civil society, including the country’s once-vibrant trade union movement, and imposed an ultra-conservative Islamist system backed by a brutal police state. Despite the severity of the repression, a series of aborted uprisings and mass protests swept the country, most significantly in 1998, 2011, [2012](#), and 2016. A pro-democracy coalition known as *Girifna* (Arabic for “We are fed up”) persisted despite many of their leaders being arrested or killed.

Striking Takeaways about Sudan’s Current Uprising

The Sudan uprising challenges a number of prevailing myths many people have in the West regarding unarmed civil insurrections.

Myth #1: Nonviolent tactics can't work against highly repressive regimes

Sudan has generally been ranked among the most bloody, violent, totalitarian regimes in the world. [Al-Bashir has been indicted](#) by the International Criminal Court on multiple counts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and other war crimes, and other top military leaders have been implicated as well. Pro-democracy activists have been repeatedly [gunned down in the streets](#) of Khartoum and other cities, yet the protests continued. In addition, unlike the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in which the largely nonviolent movements also included rioting, arson, and violent confrontations with security forces, protesters in the Sudanese capital have made a conscious choice to remain nonviolent.

Myth #2: Civil resistance can't work in impoverished countries with high illiteracy, little Internet access, and poor infrastructure

Sudan is one of the poorest countries in the world, exacerbated by ongoing armed conflicts, rampant corruption, drought, and—despite being the largest country in Africa—a lack of adequate transport and other basic infrastructure. Both literacy and Internet access are among the lowest in the Arab world, with barely half the adult population being able to read and write. The country [ranks near the bottom](#) of the Human Development Index. Despite this, hundreds of thousands of people have been mobilized across the country.

Myth #3: Successful nonviolent struggle is unrealistic in countries with serious ethnic divisions or ongoing violent conflicts

Sudan has suffered from violent internal conflict and civil war for most of the period since its independence in 1956. War waged by separatists in the south led to that region’s independence in 2011, but fighting continues on both sides of the new border. The war in the Darfur region in the west, which has included acts of genocide

against the Fur population, continues. The Arab-led military government has discriminated against other minorities as well, including the Beja, Nuba, and Fallata. Yet [all major ethnic groups](#) have been participating in the uprising. In addition to the protests in the capital of Khartoum, massive demonstrations have taken place in such northeastern cities as Atbara (where the uprising began) and Port Sudan, to the southeastern city of El-Gadatif, to the western city of Al-Fashir, the capital of Darfur.

This underscores that both the desire for political freedom and the strategy of nonviolent civil resistance to obtain it are not restricted to a nation's level of development, political stability, structure of governance, or its particular ethnic, religious, and cultural traditions. The Sudanese demonstrators' willingness to maintain a strict nonviolent discipline, far greater than in many pro-democracy struggles in more "developed" countries, is also an important reminder that the appreciation of the strategic importance of nonviolent action is far from being primarily a Western construct.

Unlike many in the [pro-democracy struggle in Egypt](#) earlier this decade who naively trusted the military to be an ally, the Sudanese are remaining steadfast in demanding civilian leadership and a minimal political role for the country's armed forces. Refusing to be placated by significant concessions that the transitional government is offering, and demanding they also step down is a high-risk/high-reward strategy. The leadership of the Sudanese army has shown its willingness to order large-scale massacres in the past. However, pro-democracy forces are hoping that—even if such orders are given—ordinary soldiers and an emerging younger generation of more moderate middle-level officers would refuse to carry them out.

With thousands of Sudanese still on the streets as of this writing, the pro-democracy movement appears to believe they have the winning hand.

This blog post is also available in Spanish: [Cómo el levantamiento por la democracia de Sudán sacude los mitos prevalecientes sobre la Resistencia Civil](#)

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