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Sudan's Democratic Revolution: How They Did It: The Anatomy of Sudan's Democratic Revolution—One Year Later

THE CONVERSATION
Academic rigor, journalistic flair

by [Stephen Zunes](#) April 15, 2020 [Also see ICNC's [Sudan's 2019 Revolution: The Power of Civil Resistance](#)]

Author of [Civil Resistance against Coups: A Comparative and Historical Perspective](#) (ICNC Monograph Series, 2018), Stephen Zunes was one of the first foreign experts to be invited to travel to Sudan following the successful nonviolent uprising last year that ended Omar al-Bashir's 30-year authoritarian rule. Zunes reports on how the Sudanese uprising succeeded, drawing on his on-the-ground meetings with activists and civilian government officials during that late 2019 trip. His research was conducted as part of an [ICNC Rapid Research and Data Collection grant](#).

When the turbulent and often tragic history of the past decade in the Middle East and North Africa is written, the 2019 pro-democracy revolution in Sudan will likely be considered one of the few bright spots. One of the world's most brutal dictatorships—in power for 30 years—was overthrown in a massive nonviolent civil insurrection involving millions of Sudanese, and a liberal technocratic civilian administration was put into place. Whether civilian democratic rule will survive the serious challenges still facing the country remains to be seen, but for now a key question is: how did Sudanese people power succeed?



Street art in Khartoum. Source: Author.

Primarily because of the entrenched and brutal regime led by its long-term dictator, General Omar al-Bashir, Sudan did not fit into what some Western analysts see as the conditions for a successful pro-democracy civil resistance movement (see my [April 2019 post](#) for more on this).

Despite this, starting in December 2018, a movement emerged which eventually brought millions of Sudanese into the streets. By April 2019, al-Bashir was overthrown by fellow military officers. Protests continued and, despite hundreds of additional deaths, by August, the military stepped down in favor of a civilian-led transitional government.

Based on my conversations with pro-democracy activists and members of the new government during my trip to Sudan this past winter, I believe their success derives from four main factors, explored below.

Building on internal strengths

The movement had, and *used*, a number of assets to their advantage. For one, there was precedence for mass organizing against the authoritarian government. Long before the Arab Spring, the Eastern European revolutions and other popular democratic uprisings that caught the world's attention, the Sudanese had toppled dictatorships in 1964 and 1985 through massive civil resistance campaigns. This history left rich soil from which ordinary people could cultivate revolutionary change—*without* the use of violence.

The movement also benefitted from strong networks that made it possible to organize locally. Unlike some civil insurrections that were almost exclusively in the capital with mostly middle-class support, the Sudanese revolution took place all over country, in all the different regions, with diverse class and ethnic participation. Professional associations played a key leadership role, but popular resistance committees were also active in even the poorest neighborhoods. Indeed, internal strength to build such a broad coalition of forces was vitally important, given the size and complexity of the country.

Capitalizing on external opportunities

In parallel, some factors beyond the movement's control represented openings for them. With the infrastructure and economy in shambles, the Sudanese regime was widely regarded as incompetent, whereas the grassroots opposition was highly organized. Despite its brutality, the regime was perceptibly weak in the face of mass numbers of young Sudanese who felt they had no future and had nothing more to lose.

Second, the movement built on support of foreign and domestic allies to their cause. The African Union and the Europeans were on the movement's side, thanks in part to efforts of the exile community and others to mobilize their support. And they weren't the only parties keen on reproaching the regime. Sudanese business people—even those who supported the ruling party—also realized that they had to end their alliance with the military rule and support democratic governance, for the sake of the economy and therefore their own self-interest.

Another opportunity external to the movement was that some of the main elements of the repressive apparatus of the regime—the police, intelligence, military, and special forces—were divided, and the opposition did an excellent job of exacerbating those divisions and using them to the movement's advantage.

Embracing diversity and nonviolent discipline

Familiar with the regime's divide-and-conquer tactics, the movement placed emphasis on staying united across religious, ethnic, and other divides. Greater Khartoum is a multi-ethnic urban area even though historically it was situated in the Arab-dominated part of the Sudan. Over the course of several decades, people from minority regions fleeing violence and poverty have flocked to the capital area.

When the protests began, the regime tried to blame the uprising on Furs, the people indigenous to the Darfur region who have been subjected to a genocidal campaign by the regime. In response, the largely Arab but multi-ethnic protesters began chanting "We are all Darfur!" In solidarity, protesters in Al Fashir, the Darfur capital, started chanting "We are all Khartoum!"

February 2019 Khartoum. Source: Sudanese Revolution Media Coverage [Facebook page](#).



Related to this diversity was the strong participation and leadership by women, which not only helped increase the number of protesters, but also provided a perspective that encouraged nonviolent discipline, democratic process, greater credibility, and better popular perception of the movement and its goals. Under al-Bashir's rule, women had been severely repressed in terms of dress codes, employment, and even the ability to leave home without the accompaniment of a close male relative. A frequent theme illustrated in murals, signs, and elsewhere during the revolution involved the *Kandaka*, a matrilineal dynasty of powerful queens from the first millennium BCE. It served as inspiration for women and a reminder that the ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam, which severely circumscribed their rights, was not inherent to Sudanese history or culture.

Yet perhaps the single most important approach the movement embraced was nonviolent discipline. Remaining nonviolent despite enormous provocation made it difficult for the regime to depict the movement in a negative light. Nonviolent discipline gained the movement sympathy it would have otherwise lost through violent tactics and made it possible for people to feel more comfortable joining the protests, thereby increasing their numbers.

The opposition stressed the importance of maintaining nonviolent discipline not out of any moral commitment to nonviolence *per se*, but because of an understanding that tactically and strategically it was the best way they could win. Having learned from the failed violent uprisings of the 1990s and early 2000s, they knew that if they had used violence, the regime would always have the advantage. By choosing what amounted to a different weapons system—peaceful protests, sit-ins, strikes, and more—the regime was unable to credibly depict the protesters as terrorists who would bring violence and chaos.

Following through on what they started

Finally, the pro-democracy movement did not stop when al-Bashir was pushed aside by the military in April 2019. Unlike in Egypt, where the opposition naively trusted the military, the Sudanese demanded they step down and allow for civilian leadership. A result was the June 3 massacre, causing well over 100 deaths. But this seemed to underscore to the military that they would have to engage in massive violence to suppress the rebellion which would discredit them further and put them in an even more untenable situation. The movement followed through on what they started, instead of lowering their hands at the first sign of a breakthrough.

There is still much to do to consolidate democracy and civilian rule in Sudan. Though civilians dominate the transitional government, the military and other elements of the old guard are still part of the system.

All the same, the toppling of al-Bashir and his military backers is an amazing accomplishment. It demonstrates that whatever the structural obstacles may be, building on internal strengths and external opportunities, embracing diversity and nonviolent discipline, and following through on what was started are important ingredients to movement success.

This should be a lesson to those struggling for greater political freedom and social justice throughout the greater Middle East. Indeed, if an unarmed, democratic civil insurrection can succeed in a country like Sudan, it can succeed almost anywhere.